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ALL-STORY WEEKLY

VOLUME 203

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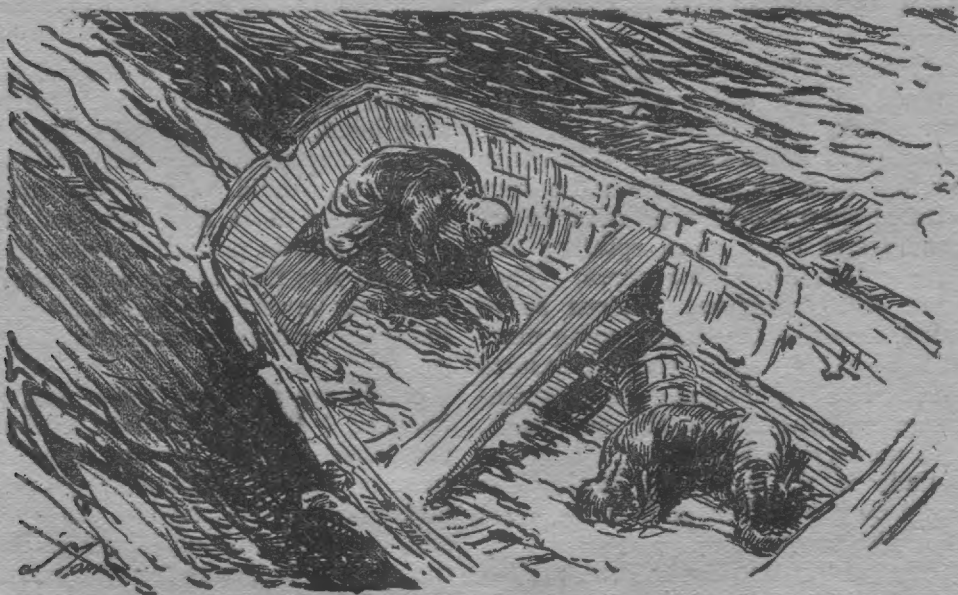
ARGOSY

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

VOLUME 203

SATURDAY, MAY 25, 1929

NUMBER 6



The derelict whaleboat had been sorely battered

The Lost Lagoon

Seeking a secret, pearl-wealthy isle with treacherous tramps of the South Seas as partners doesn't even sound safe—and young Jim Pierce knew well he was walking on dynamite

By J. ALLAN DUNN

Author of "The Cardinal's Curse," "Whirlwind Walsh," etc.

CHAPTER I:

A LONELY ATOLL.

PARADISE ISLAND! At first Jim Pierce, traders' agent, had thought it well named. That was when the lure of the South Pacific had gripped him fast. It still held him, though he had lost his first illusions.

Nobody owned Paradise. It was

remote, belonging to no regular group. It was indefinitely charted, and it had escaped the post war mandates. The tribe that had originally migrated there was reduced to fifty, not counting the children. They acknowledged no chief. They had no religion of their own, and few traditions. They possessed no craftsmanship in the arts of carving or canoe building, content with clumsily

outrigged dugouts. They were no ornaments of their own manufacture.

They were a mongrel mixture of Melanesian, Polynesian and Malay, with an uncouth dialect of their own. They had lived easily enough before the white men hastened their degeneracy. Fish, turtle, fruit, pigs, and the yams and taro from their scrabbily cultivated patches of ground contented them.

Now they had acquired appetite for canned salmon and sardines, for tobacco and gin; principally for gin. They spoke beach-English. When they wanted something at the store they worked spasmodically, bringing in coconuts and ivory nuts, splitting and drying the former for copra. They were still primitives, children as to mind, dwarfish physically, going practically naked, their chief pleasures those of belly and loins, save for swimming, spearing fish in the reef pools, and uninspired dancing.

Only in the water, or lancing for squid by the light of palm flares, were they picturesque.

The whites had spoiled the natives just as they had marred the peace and beauty of Paradise—though they could not entirely spoil that. The island was really a double atoll with two lagoons not quite divided, even at low tide, by a bank of coral grit in which coco palms grew, so that, with the palms fringing the beaches, they made two irregular and uneven circles of emerald verdure, their fronds never entirely still or silent. These, at sunrise, in flaming sunsets and opalescent afterglow, by moon and starlight, never failed to rouse in Pierce tribute to their spell.

There were the thickets of *fei*—the wild plantain—the glossy bushes of hibiscus with their vivid blooms, plumeria and *ylang-ylang*, exotically fragrant, wild oranges golden globed with fruit; the silken shimmer of the water inside the barrier reef, the infinite blue of it beyond, turning to green

in the heart of a comber crested with sparkling spray by day, shot with sea fire at night. The constant rustle of the palms, the murmur of the reef; all these were part of the charm of Lotus Land.

It was the whites, Pierce's own race, who marred it. Not Giddings, the Wesleyan missionary, laboring to convert the heathen. Some of the fire had gone from his eyes that once flashed with fervor. The islanders sang his *himinis*, and liked to hear the organ; they ate the cake his wife made for them, a mild woman who had no business in those latitudes; and they mocked him in private because, if his religion was that of the white man, it could not be very strong, since none of the other *papalangi* ever attended his services.

Aside from Pierce, there was, for instance, "Blimy" Johnson, cockney, dismissed steward, running a general store on his own, but selling little but beer and gin. He played a concertina, and, on ripe occasions, he got some of the younger native girls and women in for a *hula* that lapsed into drunken dancing and bawdy love-making. He had an ancient billiard table, patched of cloth, its slate cracked. Blimy catered for entertainment, and was said to have got hold of some good pearls and saved money. A fox, Blimy Johnson, with his shallow blue eyes that hid guile, his narrow, pimply face, fourth-rate body, and the cunning brain that had not kept him from being caught out peddling steamer supplies.

Rance called him a bounder. Rance was a trader's agent, like Pierce, gathering nuts for the trips of the copra schooner owned by his backers. But Rance had gone native, living with the Tonga woman he had brought with him. Pierce, seated on his launch, fiddling with the overboard motor he had imported at his own expense, heard him rowing with her. She was getting the best of it now, with her virulent,

garrulous tongue, yelling invective. Presently Rance would beat her.

Rance was a wastrel, well on in his thirties. He was educated, and claimed to have been a lawyer in the States. He had drifted round the world and wound up at Paradise. He was sodden, body and soul, with gin. He had no ambitions, but he was entertaining when sober—or rather, halfway sober, for he was never free from the reek of Hollands. Pierce did not trust him, but, after a fashion, he liked the elder man, and sometimes took him out in the launch, the only one on Paradise, when Rance asked him, being “fed up with the old lady.”

Boozy Farrell drifted down the beach, frowzy and unkempt, hoping to cadge a drink from Blimy. Boozy was beach comber, pure and simple. He had no woman. Once he had married a Cook's Island girl, who had died in childbirth. Boozy was sloppily sentimental over her at times, tears of self-pity runneling down his dirty, unshaven face. He lived as the natives did, usually eating with them, telling them smutty stories and showing them a few tricks, tolerated by them, careless of contempt, of everything.

There was Wong Lee, who lived at the far end of the southern lagoon. He dried *bêche-de-mer* and sharks' fins. He bought pearl shell and pearls when there were any. Twice a year a clumsy barkentine, manned by Chinese, took his produce, and left him opium and other supplies. He was remote from the rest, with a sphinx-like dignity of his own.

Once there had been good shell in the two lagoons—pearls, too. They were practically fished out; needed a seven years' rest; but occasionally, between the official openings of the Tuamotu atolls, a pearler came to Paradise to try the lottery. Then Blimy opened up his pub, rounded up his *hula* girls, and the beach saw nightly debauch until the pearler sailed away.

Pierce was sick of it all. The rains

had taken the heart out of him. He was thankful they were over, with the incessant, steaming downpour, the mold on everything, the gray skies and water, the maddening hiss of the rain on earth and leaves, the clatter of it on the iron roofs of the storehouses.

He had been glad of the job when it offered. Paradise Island! He had dreamed dreams of going pearling for himself, but he had soon found that it took capital, which he lacked, and experience he had yet to obtain. The big soap companies had the best concessions, where they did not plant their own groves. He was a *malahini*—a Johnny Newcome—and so the tender-foot had snapped up the chance of running the store and gathering the copra crop.

The romance of it had soon gone stale. There was no adventure, only a sordid round of work, when it did not rain. Two things he kept away from, liquor and women. He was neither prude nor prohibitionist, but he had Rance and Boozy for examples. The girls left him alone after their first flirtatious advances. They were almost black, and they were not comely, nor overclean in their habits, for all their daily bathing.

HE finished with his motor and went up to his little, stilted cabin to get his supper, carefully preparing a meal that was savory enough—if there had been any one to share it with him. Breadfruit baked mealy, boiled taro root, a silver mullet, coffee, and a can of greengages. Then he lit his pipe and sat on his deck chair on the tiny porch, waiting for the sunset to cool and the stars to come out.

Strange, tantalizing stars, that always reminded him of northern constellations, of city lights and all that passed beneath them. It was a nightly sort of homesickness he practiced just as one cannot resist testing a sore tooth; a nostalgia he knew was not good for him.

Blimy was playing his wheezy concertina, singing—as he styled it:

*"Igh up, where cliffs they are craggy,
There's where the love of my life
wytes for me;
Night comes, Hi long for my deary,
Hi spread hout my w'ite wings and
syle 'dme to thee."*

Rance's wife was quiet. Boozy was guzzling grub somewhere. The twilight deepened. Blimy, singing about love! That meant nothing to Jim Pierce as yet, save as a vague happiness that might come his way—after he had made good. Not much chance of it here, marooned on Paradise.

*"W'ite wings, they never grow weary,
They carry me cheerily hover the
sea;
Night comes, Hi—"*

Song and accompaniment ceased abruptly. Pierce saw natives running down the beach to a canoe. Something was up. The tide was flooding, but they had the light craft in the water, lifting it, wading out with it, climbing in and plying strenuous paddles toward the reef gate, half hidden by spray. No ordinary cause would take them out at nightfall, even if they could make the passage.

He caught their excitement, eager for something to break the monotony. As he ran down his rickety steps he saw Rance coming on the run from his right; Blimy, the concertina still swinging from its wrist strap, shuffling loose slippered from the opposite direction. Rance turned toward Pierce:

"Fix your motor O. K.? They've sighted a whaleboat. Looked like there was one man in it, and they think he's dead. But the boat's worth something. Come on, let's go."

Pierce was willing. He did not want to do the natives out of the whaleboat, but here was something else. Adventure, vicarious though it might be. Poor devil in the boat; shipwreck, then sun, sharks, starvation!

The fly wheel spun, and they were

off. The canoe had capsized in the passage, the amphibian islanders swimming about it, laughing, excited, baling out for another effort as the launch passed them. Pierce had the tiller, tended the engine, setting it to full power as they charged the gut, rose high on a roller, topped it and went surging on to the next. Once past the first tall ranks of surf that rose on the ramp of the coral barrier, it was easy going. The canoe was through, but could not catch them.

Rance stood up, looking for the whaleboat, coming in on the tide. Its stem made streaks of phosphor as waves slapped it, and they made out a dim shape in the stern, motionless, huddled. Even in the dusk they could see, as they came alongside, that the craft had been sorely tested. The gunwale was broken, the paint had been blistered from its sides.

Water swashed on the bottom boards, and in it, beneath the thwarts, lay two figures, twisted, stiff, dried mummies of men with starting ribs and indrawn bellies, eyes staring, teeth showing.

All three were natives. A little life remained in the one at the stern; a faint pulse.

Pierce set the launch alongside. Rance stepped into the whaleboat, stepping over the dead men, bending above the third.

"All natives," he said. "This one's alive. I can feel his pulse, but it's just a flutter. He won't last long."

"We'll get him ashore right away. I'll give you a hand with him."

But Rance had transferred his attention from the man's wrist to his hand. There was the end of a fishskin poke showing. He got it free, examined it. It seemed empty to Pierce, and then he heard the other's exclamation:

"By God, Jim! Look at these!"

There were two globules on Rance's palm that gleamed faintly even in the dusk. Pearls, big as marrow-fat peas!

Rance rolled them with a forefinger, testing their symmetry.

"Perfect—and matched," he said in a whisper, looking at the canoe coming up fast. "This chap's a diver."

"Meantime he's dying. Never mind the pearls now."

"May be more in the boat. Not likely. Maybe we can make him talk. Ought to tow the boat in, though. It's worth money."

"Damn the boat!" exploded Pierce. "We don't want the poor devil to croak. Get him in."

AS the canoe surged up, the men in it saw nothing but the two white men transferring the body, abandoning the whaleboat for their prize. The launch went ahead. When the whaleboat was beached it was empty of all but islanders. They had tossed the dead men over to the sharks.

"How about sending over to the missionary?" suggested Pierce. "His wife can nurse this chap."

"And let Giddings find out the source of the pearls when he comes to? Blab it all over the shop. Nothing doing. I smell a big thing. What the hell does Giddings know about medicine? Lost two men with dysentery, didn't he? He may cure souls, but my wife knows more about nursing than he and his wife put together."

There was logic in that. Rance's woman undoubtedly could do better than the Giddings. Pierce sensed that Rance's Samaritanism was purely selfish, but it seemed the best thing to do. They carried the man to Rance's place, and his woman immediately took charge. The native was beyond consciousness. Once his eyes fluttered and he muttered something, but sank back into oblivion.

They had quinine, calomel, cholera medicine, castor oil, aspirin and permanganate. Pierce fancied that what the man needed was adrenalin or strychnine, but Rance's woman busied herself with a brew of herbs, and then

commenced to *lomi-lomi* the wasted body in native massage.

He was in bad shape. Sun, starvation, exposure, had sapped his vitality, shrunk veins and arteries. He was comatose. They could get no nourishment into him, only a little water and the herbal potion, a slight quantity of which they got past the clenched teeth, stroking his wizened throat to make him swallow.

"Come over to-morrow, Jim," said Rance. "Here's your pearl."

Pierce took the gem mechanically.

Back in his own quarters, Pierce took out the pearl and set it on his table, under the lamp. He did not know much about pearls, but now the sea-jewel held a shimmering luster that told its purity. He knew that matched gems called for quadruple prices. This one might be worth a thousand, two thousand dollars. If they got more—

He stared, fascinated. It was a magic seed, a sesame that might prove the word to open up a treasure house, free him from the sordid life on Paradise.

The man was in the same condition when he went over to Rance's in the morning. His breath misted a mirror, his pulse fluttered and his heart was feebly persisting, but he was still clutched by the skeleton grip of death.

"Come back later," said Rance. "I've got something we'll try presently. We've got to get it out of him. God Almighty, Jim, this is the chance of a lifetime, and I'm not going to pass it up! Keep mum about the pearls."

Pierce went down to the beach where the islanders were busy about the whaleboat. Its seams had shrunk apart, the name letters had flaked off. He thought he could make out an N and a G, but he was not sure. The natives were calking the strakes, exuberant over their trove. There was nothing to indicate identity, no sign that either food or water had been aboard on their voyage. The tale of

the tragedy remained locked back of the stiff jaws of the one survivor—if he was to be that.

Pierce went back to Rance's after his noon meal. To his surprise he heard voices. Rance's and another, faint and monotonous. The woman was standing beside the bed with a gin bottle in one hand and an empty glass she set down as she put a fat finger to her blubbery lips.

Rance was kneeling by the bed, his ear close to the dying man's face, prompting him now and then in native, of which Pierce understood a little. Rance was cold sober, but his face was flushed, beaded with sweat. He flashed one triumphant look at Pierce.

The babbling went on, ceased. Rance stood up.

"He's gone," he said. "but I've got it. You and me, Jim, we're rich, if we play our cards right."

Pierce took the mirror, held it before the lips, now apart, the jaw sagging. It no longer clouded. Heart and pulse were stilled. The man was dead.

"What did you give him?" he asked.

"Got a slug of gin into him."

"And the reaction killed him."

"Rats! He wouldn't have lasted the day. His whole body was dried up. Come outside, I want to talk to you."

Pierce listened. He could not help it. Without doubt the man could not have been saved. He could understand Rance's attitude. He was not devoid of it himself as the tale progressed. Here was freedom. Wealth!

CHAPTER II.

THE PEARLER'S STORY.

THEY had gone up to Pierce's shack, leaving the woman to prepare the body for a decent burial. Rance seemed relieved to get away. He sat with Pierce on the little ve-

randa, fanning himself and drinking a mixture of young coconut milk and gin. He told the story leisurely, as if he were assembling it from the jerky, haphazard sentences he had got from the dead man.

"Flying Scud, that was the name of her," he said. "Accounts for the N and G you made out. Owned and sailed by a pearler named Power, or Powers. This chap who just passed out called him Poari. His own name was Taura—a Paumotuan, diving for Powers. Powers has done a lot of sailing. Tried the fisheries as far as Ceylon. Been lately round Thursday Island. Got a tip there about a lagoon that was virgin. Taura didn't say whether the place has a name or not. I couldn't press him or I might have lost out. Had to piece together what he told with a little coaching. It seems to be V. A., and as far as I gathered the island is pretty new, though you can't tell for sure. But there's earthquakes there, and a smoking crater, and a lake of stinking water which is probably hydrochloric acid fumes. There's sweet water, and the lagoon's clear. Part of the island, at least, is grown over with the usual bush. Plenty of palms."

He paused to swig at his coconut, and Pierce conjured up a mental picture of the island. He knew that V. A. on the charts stood for the volcanic atoll formations, as opposed to true volcanic islands and coral ring atolls. They were supposed—the V. A.'s—to confirm the Darwinian theory. He turned for his tobacco tin to refill his pipe and saw Rance regarding him speculatively.

"Look here, Jim, you told me you could navigate, didn't you?"

Pierce nodded.

"I wouldn't call myself a blue-water man," he said. "I owned a small schooner once before my old man lost all he had in the Kern oil fields. It was a racing craft, but it was seaworthy. Most of my racing was in

San Francisco Bay, but we had cruises to Monterey and San Diego, and when I went in for the San Francisco-Honolulu event, I studied navigation. Had an old-timer along—we were allowed one professional for that race—and he said I qualified."

"Good!" Rance appeared relieved. "Now, then—They found the lagoon. O. K. Taura swears the shell there is gold-lipped. I never heard of that being found much this side of the East Indies, around Celebes and the Sulu Sea, though there's always talk of it. It's worth twelve dollars a ton more than the shell we get round here—if we're going to bother with shell. It's the pearls we're after, and, according to Taura, there are shell patches in the lagoon lousy with them. Not that they got so many. But a native diver knows a pearl oyster when he sees one. No mistaking them, and there are conditions that foster them. Some claim there's always a certain type of weed growing where they are. The trouble was that they lay deep, eighteen fathoms and better. Powers sent on the Flying Scud, with his mate Hansen in charge, to get a diving outfit at Suva, the nearest place to buy one. Powers stayed on the island to hold it down. He'd got hold of a good thing, and he meant to hang on to it. The chap who tipped him off, a Fiji from Levuka, might have passed on the word. Now, do you know Dutch Shoals?"

"You mean the rocks northwest of here? They're only a hundred miles away."

"Around that. Took that whale-boat three weeks to make it. Taura lost count toward the end; but call it three weeks. They got blown away. No one to tell them where they were. Hansen got killed. Mainmast fell on him when they struck."

"On Dutch Shoals?"

"Yup." Rance was complacent now. Pierce was thinking of Powers, holding down the island. It was his

by right of opening the lagoon. Rance went on:

"Flying Dutchman Shoals, it used to be called. Looks like an old-time ship in some weathers. Some folks call the place Phantom Rocks. More than one ship's piled up there. They crashed, and a gale came up—monsoon, I imagine. Eight in the crew all told. Five of 'em got away in the one boat that wasn't smashed. You know the rest. Either Taura hooked these pearls or Powers let his divers work on shares. It doesn't matter. They didn't bring along any instruments. Didn't know how to use them. They're aboard the ship. And so's the log! The ship's breaking up by this time. It's a gamble, of course, but a damn' good one. If we can find the position set down we're fixed."

"What about Powers? It's his lagoon."

"The hell it is!"

"Why not?"

RANCE'S face changed. It had been fierce, his eyes avid. He lost his assertive manner after he had stared at Pierce for a minute, and he leaned forward, his hand on the other's knee, talking confidentially.

"Don't be a chump. If you were Powers, marooned on an island where no one has ever been—that's a cinch or they'd have left the lagoon the way this one is on Paradise—if you were Powers, who is beginning to think something has gone wrong by now, wouldn't you be grateful if some one came along with the news of the wreck and offered to go shares? I would. We've got as much right to fish that lagoon as he has, anyway. Findings keepings in a place like that. He hasn't any lease. We'll do the right thing, of course. Here's my plan:

"The weather's settled. Trades have shifted since the rains. You and me will go out to Dutch Shoals and see what we can find. That launch of yours can make it in a day. If we get

what we want we'll have to take others in. Blimy's got his schooner. It ain't much, but it's good enough. Wong has a diving outfit. We'll need that. If we had the cash it would be a fool thing to go to Suva and buy one when we don't have to. They'd want to know where we were going; do their damndest to find out. Wong's got pump and all. Bought it from an outfit that came here two years ago and didn't have any luck. Gave them pearls for it, I imagine. He's got some, crazy for more. He may have had an idea he'd work the lagoon here himself, but what shell there is left is wormy. That makes four. Blimy'll want to go along with his ship. I don't know about Wong. It's too bad to split four ways, but there's no help for it, and it's a turn of luck anyhow. Take us away from this miserable hole, back to God's country. I'm fed up with it. I reckon it's the same with you."

"What 'll you do with your wife? Take her along?" It was more or less of an idle question, but it fired Rance.

"She's no wife of mine. That interfering fool, Giddings, tried to make me marry her. Do you think I'd be tied legally to a fat, black trollop like that? She'd look well in New York, wouldn't she?"

Something in Pierce's face caused Rance to moderate once more, show a side of himself that Pierce fancied was not the dominant one. It might have existed once, now it was largely synthetic. The prospect of the pearls had brought out all the qualities of greed and fierceness that his life in the South Seas had nourished. Pierce shrugged his shoulders. It was none of his affair after all. He could not expect to choose his companions on a quest like this. Life down here was in the raw.

"I'll take her to Tonga and set her up for life, if she wants to go," said Rance. "There have been times when I wanted to bash her head in, but now that's over—with any luck. How about it, Jim?"

"How about your copra? Your outfit will be along soon."

Pierce's own copra had been taken the week before. Rance laughed.

"I should stew over their stinking copra. It's here. They can leave some one to take my place if any one's fool enough to want it. They can take over the store. My woman 'll look out for it till then. They can have my house, and her as well, if they want to. Don't you want to go into this? Why all the stalling?"

"I wasn't trying to raise objections," said Pierce. "We'll go as soon as we've buried Taura."

Rance snorted. The look he veiled was half contemptuous.

"He's a *kanaka*. Let the natives do it. Marama will boss the job. She's laying him out now. We'll go out as soon as we can get grub and water and gas in the boat—before any one knows we're gone and begins to wonder about it. Blimy 'ud try and beat us to it in a jiffy. Wong's a Chink, and knows his onions. Farrell don't count. They don't know about the pearls, but they wouldn't think we were out fishing. However, when they start thinking we'll be halfway there."

"You're right. Let's go."

CHAPTER III.

DISTRUST AND TREACHERY.

AGAINST the opalescent sky, fast fading to night, the crags of Dutch Shoals stood up in a silhouetted upthrust that held slight resemblance to a ship. It was only in the mists of squall and storm that the Phantom Rocks deserved their title. It was high tide, and the sea about them was seething in surf over the reefs, the darker water lit with sea fire as the stars began to come out. It was tricky work to land there, amid fins of lava and ledges and mushrooms of coral.

Pierce made a circuit of the place

as the moon came sliding up in the east, full and fair as the lining of a shell. It showed them caverns and recesses. It revealed a deep gap that almost split through the formation, a lane of blackness where the water boomed and broke along the sides and end with ghostly phosphorescence.

Close to its entrance was the fragment of a wreck, a barnacled skeleton, keel and broken futtocks and a few ribs. Not the Flying Scud. She had been carried in, according to Taura, and lay somewhere in the narrow gorge—unless she had slid off and foundered.

Pierce waited until the moon lifted before venturing in, Rance fuming with impatience. The tide was at its best for them, but it was a chancy job. It had taken wild fury to drive the schooner over the reefs, tearing the bottom out of it before the gale flung it into the gap, broken masted, the mate dead, the native crew clinging, bruised and battered, to what holds they could find, two of them swept over into the wild tumult of the imprisoned sea.

Now there was a serene, fantastic beauty in the lonely spot as they worked past rocks that the shifting surges showed shaggy with kelp, shining with the stranded sea-stars of the luminous Noctilucidæ. Guana showed pale here and there on the ledges, and sleepy boobies, terns and noddies squawked protestingly, a few rising, but settling down as the launch nosed through and entered the gap the moon was already silvering.

The light slid along the seamed wall as Pierce shut off the little engine and they went ahead under its final impetus, Pierce ready to fend off, Rance in the bow, using a flash torch.

"She's there!" he shouted. "High and dry, what's left of her!"

The hull of the Flying Scud lay half in, half out of a rift that had held her fast, her bows crumpled, slightly canted, her decks a confusion of rigging.

Pierce eased the launch against the ledge and Rance sprang ashore, climbing to the slanting deck, the beam of his torch dancing in front of him, disappearing in the shattered companionway as Pierce took care of his boat. It was comparatively placid save for the swell, but he was not minded to let any carelessness leave them on Dutch Shoals. It might look like a ruined fairy palace now, but it took little imagination to change that suggestion to an ogre's stronghold. In bad weather Phantom Rocks must be an inferno of the sea.

His own torch had a weak battery. It was hard to get new ones on Paradise, but this sufficed to guide him over the raffle. The cabin reeked of bilge and mold. Seas had swept it, drained off now. It was the ordinary trader's arrangement, a permanent table just abaft the mainmast whose stump came through to beyond the deck. There were transoms and screwed-down chairs, a desk, two alleys leading forward, the doors of two cabins in the stern, with a narrow passage between leading to the lazarette.

There was a built-in desk. A drawer had been wrenched open and Rance had an open book from which he was in the act of tearing out a leaf when he heard Pierce. He started, turned to meet Pierce's feeble torch ray. It was hard to judge his expression.

"Got it," he said. "The entry, giving the position. No sense in taking the whole log."

"I don't agree with you," said Pierce coldly. "It will be evidence to Powers that we've been aboard. There'll be some record of the storm they ran into before they hit. Showing up with a torn page looks fishy."

He could not understand Rance's motive. It might mean nothing, but Pierce had a hunch it did. Surely Rance could not figure on holding out the position. He would have to give it to Pierce, if he was going to navigate. There was no one else on Para-

dise Island capable of that, unless it was Wong. One never knew a Chinaman's attainments. Of course Rance might have an idea of making the split three instead of four.

It flashed into Pierce's mind that he had not considered Powers in the matter at all. Rance nodded.

"Guess you're right at that," he said. "Let's look round."

THERE was not much to find. Pierce took charge of the precious

log book. And he underscored his determination, already arrived at, to keep an eye on Rance. The prospect of treasure did not seem to make him more dependable as a partner.

One discovery Rance characteristically snickered at. The ship was pretty well wrecked. Pierce took the sextant and chronometer, though he doubted the efficiency of the last, which had long stopped. Some of the stores were available and they got them out. The Flying Scud had no auxiliary. But, in the port stateroom, aft, tiny, but well planned, they found a pair of small worn shoes with rubber soles, that had never belonged to a man.

"They may be relics," chuckled Rance, "but it shows Powers is human. How about getting back?"

Pierce judged the tide.

"We can still make it on the ebb, if we hurry," he decided. They hustled the stuff aboard that was worth taking, started the engine and ran out, once grazing a reef that took a shaving off the false keel with which Pierce had supplied the launch. The moon was high and the sea smooth as they ate a snack, heading back for Paradise.

Ten miles off the island they met the retrieved whaleboat, manned by islanders tugging at the oars while others bailed. The recalking of the seams had been hastily finished, it seemed. There was a man in the stern who snuggled down until only the top of his head showed. It wore a frayed white sailor's hat of duck.

They ran the launch over to investigate. The man was Farrell, astoundingly sober.

"Runnin' out to the shoals fer dolphin," he said. "You folks have any luck—fishin'?"

"Might have been better," said Rance. The launch held on.

"Boozy!" Rance said as they got out of earshot. "Cold sober. Can you beat it? Said he was after dolphin! That damn woman of mine has been at the gin and talking. News runs round Paradise like radio. If she said anything about pearls I'll break her neck, fat as it is. Boozy's trying to butt in! Smells a rat. I told you how it would be when they found we were gone. Damn all women, anyway. And Boozy is thick with the natives. Well, we've got the laugh on 'em. If you're going to keep that log, Jim, you sleep on it, with a gun under your pillow."

Boozy Farrell was not the only one, it seemed. Blimy Johnson strolled down the beach to meet them.

"Been wreckin', 'ave you?" he asked genially. "Might 'ave let me in on it. 'Ow about a gin an' bitters up at my plice?"

"On you?" asked Rance. "Is it your birthday?"

"It 'appens to be 'is majesty the king's," said Blimy. "You Hamericans don't believe in himperialism, but you might 'elp me drink 'is 'ealth."

"Good break for him," whispered Rance to Pierce as they went up to Johnson's place. "Gives us our opening, seeing we need him, but, even on George's birthday, Blimy isn't giving gin away free for nothing. We'll surprise him by opening up."

If Johnson was surprised he did not betray it. He looked at the pearls and asked to see the log book after the proposition was put up to him.

"I don't flatter myself that you'd want me in on this if I didn't 'appen to 'ave my schooner," he said. "It sounds like a good lay, but I want to be sure of my end before I risk the 'ooker."

"We'll buy it from you, if you like," said Rance. "These two matched pearls are worth all of ten thousand and you know it. Sell us the schooner. She ain't worth one."

"'Ere in Paradise she's worth 'er weight in gold. You're downy coves, but I'm no sucker, as you Yanks say. Show me the log."

"You can see that when we're at sea. Not now. I know what you've got in your mind, Blimy. You think you'll get the position and wait until my outfit comes along and then make a bargain with them. Try it and see what Fluke Yardleigh 'll give you out of it. Here we're offering you a fair share—"

"I'm tyking a third—or nothing," said Blimy. Rance had suggested splitting whatever they realized into ten shares of which he and Pierce, as the originators, were to get three shares each, with two to Blimy and two to Wong. The wrangle went on. Pierce broke into it.

"This is a plain business proposition to me," he said. "Johnson has got a schooner which doesn't amount to much. He certainly can't do any better with Yardleigh than what we are prepared to offer him. Neither he nor Yardleigh can get anywhere without the position of the island. Rance and I know that and no one else. We need Johnson, but we can undoubtedly make a dicker with Yardleigh. We need Wong and his diving suit. It was Rance's idea in the beginning. It was my launch that developed it. Now take it or leave it: Four equal shares out of what we get from Powers, who is on the ground with prior rights. Forty-eight hours ago none of us dreamed of such a thing. Why squabble like a lot of damned kids?"

"Spoke like a gent," said Blimy. "A fourth it is. I put in the schooner, and I don't hask to see the position of the bloody hisland. You hain't goin' on a pleasure trip. Hi'll be the bloomin' supercargo. 'Ave you seen Wong?"

"I'll see him to-night," said Rance. "There won't be any trouble about him."

BLIMY winked at Pierce; why, Pierce did not understand until later, when Johnson came over to his shack after dark.

"Rance 'its the pipe," Blimy explained. "Hi'll bet 'e owes Wong plenty right now. 'E'll myke Wong square accounts on this lay. Who's doin' the divin'?"

"That isn't settled. Rance hasn't been down and neither have I, though I'm willing to take a chance if the outfit's in order. I hadn't figured Wong, or you."

"You can count me hout right 'ere and now," said Blimy hastily. "Hi've got a weak 'eart, Hi 'ave. Couldn't stand pressure. Wong might go."

"There's Powers," suggested Pierce. Blimy waved the idea aside.

"We'll tyke Powers when we come to 'im. If Wong wants to go down, let 'im, with the syme to Rance. But don't you go, Pierce, not unless you're bloody sure of the man at the pump. It's too heasy to 'ave something go wrong."

"Look here, Johnson, what are you driving at?"

"I'm not drivin'. Just 'intin'. Four equal shares, hain't we? 'Arf of four's two. Rance and Wong are too bloody close to suit me, that's all. I don't trust Chinks, and a white man that smokes opium and 'as to go to the Chinks for 'is dope hain't to be trusted either. Not when there's a fortune in sight. You don't think much of me, but there's worse than Jerry Johnson, blimy Gord! You treated me like a gent this afternoon. Went straight to the 'eart of it. Quarter shares, you says. Fair and square. You can count on me, mister. And tyke my tip. Don't you do any diving, no matter *who's* sending down the air."

Blimy was a bit grotesque, but there was no question but what he was in

earnest. He was not unselfish about it. He feared a combination between Rance and Wong and he wanted an ally.

They were still together when Rance came back. He had made the deal with Wong.

"Start as soon as you can get that schooner of yours ready for sea," he told them. "Her bottom must be foul."

"I'll 'ave 'er 'auled up creek and twenty *kanakas* scrubbin' 'er by noon," said Johnson. "You myke out a list of stores an' git 'em aboard. If you want to go hover the schooner, Pierce, you come down and boss the job."

Rance refused a drink, his enthusiasm seemed to have lost vigor like an opened bottle of charged water, his tone was flat.

"E's been 'itting it," said Johnson with his finger to the side of his nose as Rance left them. "I thought Wong would come along, but I didn't figger 'im for cook. It 'll be good grub—on the way out. I never saw a Chink yet that wasn't a good cook, but I thought Wong was a chop above that. 'E's superior, 'e is. Top caste, to judge by the w'y the yellow beggars that come 'ere treat 'im."

"Why do you say 'on the way out'?" asked Pierce. "Do you think he'll quit if we do well?"

"You can figger that out for yourself, mister," Blimy answered mysteriously. "All I've got to s'y is that on the w'y 'ome I'm going to see some one else taste the dish before I do. It 'll pay you an' me to stick together. I suppose you think I'm pullin' your leg," he added as he got up. "Lord lummy, I could tell you a lot of funny things I've seen in my time. When it comes to money, or pearls, or gold, in a deal like this, it don't do to trust no one the first time you go in with 'em. Nor the second neither. It all depends on the pot 'ow the gyme is played. Bigger the stakes, the more jiggery goin' on. Gord blimy, mister, I could

open your heyes. You keep 'em hoopen on this trip and remember, you can count on me. Wong ain't got much use for me, haccount of a deal or two. Rance 'll be with him. Four into twenty is five apiece. Two into twenty is ten."

With that more or less cryptic remark he left and presently Pierce heard the concertina going and Blimy in full song. He ran to sentiment:

*"Golden years hago, hin a mill beside
the sea,*

*There lived a little myden who plighted
'er troth to me.*

*The mill wheel hit is silent now, the
myde's heyes clos-ed be;*

*But I shall ne'er forget the words she
sang to me."*

PIERCE started to get into his pyjamas. It was hot and he left his back window open. It was screened with wire, as was the porch and a swing door in front, but the salt air had rusted the mesh and his requisition for new wire had not been honored, so that he used a tent mosquito netting for his bed. He latched the swing door, left the one between the two small rooms wide for what air there was.

Blimy was still maundering through the chorus:

*"Do not forget me, do n-ot forget me,
Think sometimes hof me still,*

*When the morning breaks and the
throstle awakes,*

Remember the Myde of the Mill."

Pierce set the log book under his mattress, with the pearl in his leather cigarette case, his gun under his pillow. He meant to clean and oil it in the morning. Things seemed somehow unreal, the sudden prospects, the adventure opening, with the romance leaching out of it, through the revelation of the inner characters of his partners. Wong he knew little of, but Blimy was a sharper, who, if he made pact with another, did so for his own ends. Rance a potential scoundrel, no doubt of that.

The prospect of riches had leavened the germs of greed and evil in them.

"Do no-ot forget me, do no-ot forget me;

Remember your Mary, the Myde of the Mill."

The concertina was blaring and blating, Blimy howling to the moon when Pierce dozed off. He woke with the certainty that some one was in the room. There had been a hand beneath his pillow. His gun was gone!

He lay doggo for a moment, holding his breath. He was not particularly alarmed, a condition on which he congratulated himself later. It was the first time he had been in as tight a place. They were after the pearl, or the log; both perhaps. As the only navigator on Paradise, unless Wong kept that knowledge concealed up his wide, long sleeve, with Blimy in possession of the only serviceable craft for such a voyage, there seemed only one solution to him.

He had wondered whether Blimy's talk had not been largely a desire to impress him with Blimy's shrewdness and make him inclined to side with the cockney. Now it flashed over him that if the log book was missing and if Rance had noted the position, memorized it, he might maneuver to hold up the trip until his employers arrived and made a fresh deal with them, if that would be to his advantage. It might be, with the skipper of the collection ship. It carried a native mate, Rance remembered.

He moved slightly and the rusty bed-spring whined. He saw a shadow rise and glide through the door between two rooms.

Pierce drew up the netting and leaped out silently, on bare feet. There was a shotgun in the corner left by the former agent, foul and, to Pierce's mind, too dangerous to use, a cheap weapon with a crack near the breech in the single barrel. He groped for it and heard the swing door close. When

2 A

he reached it the night had swallowed all trace of the intruder. There were a lot of footprints, shod and naked, about his steps and he did not bother to look for sign, but went back to the bed with a sudden thought that he might have been deliberately decoyed away while the mattress was searched. But log and pearl were still there.

The entry was explained when he lit the lamp. The wire screen had been snipped on three sides, an easy job in its condition. He took a slip of paper and copied down the position of the island, ripped the band of his pants, inserted it and sewed up the seam.

He went through the log. Most of the mate's entries were in pencil, others in ink, a more educated hand, undoubtedly Powers's. Pierce, with the edge of his knife and a rubber, erased all positions for several days before and after the island had been sighted.

He was now in sole possession of any written record of the whereabouts of the rich lagoon, considering himself justified, fortified with a sound excuse on account of the attempted robbery. Once started, the figures were the common property of the four of them. Pierce meant to play fair; but he was going to heed Blimy's advice and keep his eyes wide open. The question of diving he deferred. The possibility of Wong fixing the food, he was inclined to consider a delusion of Blimy's, but he was convinced that it would be wise to take into due consideration the lawless latitude, the type of men who lived there, the temptation of enlarging shares by getting rid of one or more of the partners.

CHAPTER IV.

OFF FOR THE PEARLS.

BLIMY'S schooner was not much to look at. It needed paint and spar varnish, its canvas had weak places in it from mold, the running gear wanted overhauling or replacing and

Pierce did not altogether like the look of the stays. Putty was lacking in the deck seams and, from the amount of bilge in her, he had a notion that a good job of calking was in order.

His announcements were not taken in good part by either Blimy or Rance. They were both eager to get away, Rance so much so that Pierce dropped his early suspicion that Rance had planned a coup of delay and a switch to a combination of himself and Yardleigh, the skipper of the schooner due to arrive before long.

"Do your overhauling at sea," Rance said. "You can take extra gear along. Give the boys something to do. They can putty and scrape and varnish. Let's get away from this dump. We don't have to come back to it again if we're lucky. We can go to Tahiti. Papette's the best pearl market in the South Seas. The big northern buyers have got their agents down there."

"We'd be lucky if we made Tahiti as we stand," said Pierce. "Where's your new gear? There's no spare canvas or good rope in my stores or yours. Johnson hasn't any. Come aboard, I want to show you a few things."

He was insistent and Rance and Blimy reluctantly went with him. The schooner—it was named Elsie—was careened in the shallow tidal creek, where the fresh water at ebb loosened the grip of barnacles and weed for the convenience of the islanders who were scraping and scouring.

"Some of those stays are liable to pull out in a stiff breeze," pointed out Pierce. "The rail isn't the only wood that's got rot in it. Now come below."

Grumbling, they scrambled through. It was black inside the hold save for faint streaks of light along the sides.

"She's old and she's been strained," said Pierce. "That's daylight you see through the strakes. On the port tack in a good wind you could come down here and look out to starboard. Vice versa. She ought to be hooped, or cemented."

Rance growled something about amateur skippers.

"Blimy," said Johnson. "Hi know she ain't jest off the w'ys, but what are you goin' to do habout it? Hi've got cement, if that's hall that's biting you. What did you hexpect, a cup defender?"

"There'll be plenty of calms," said Rance. "We've got to make the best of it. If she was drifting on a level keel, you could cement her at sea, couldn't you?"

"I suppose so. But if those sails tear badly or the stays and halyards part, where are we?"

When they came out of her Wong Lee was waiting for them. He saw plainly enough the friction between the three men, or rather between two of them and Pierce.

"Something the matteh?" he asked in English, better than beach-pidgin.

Pierce explained, looking at him with interest. So far, he had taken little notice of the Chinaman. He was inclined to consider Blimy right when he placed Wong above the average coolie. There was good skull development above the placid, moonlike face and those inscrutable eyes, black as liquid jet, almond-shaped between smooth lids.

"Mo' betteh not talk in flont of *kanakas*," Wong suggested. "Maybe not easy to catch clew. I got plenty lope, some canvas. Can do, I think."

"That settles it," said Rance. "We can get away. If my outfit shows up before we go they'll get nousey. It's none of their business, but Fluke Yardleigh can smell out a thing like this without a thing to rouse his hunch. He'll soon find out all there is and we'll have one hell of a time shunting him. He's got a tough bunch of *kanakas* aboard. Maliata men, some of 'em. Fluke used to be in the black-birding game and he's a hard-shielled, twenty-minute egg. I didn't mean to ride you, Pierce. I dare say you know what you're talking about, but this is

not the time to be fussy. We've got to be willing to take some chances. I'll admit I'm in a fever to get away and in a funk lest something turns up to bilk me out of the only chance I've had come my way for years."

He was as nervous as a hunting dog in a blind. If he had been drinking, it was but little. His eyes were bright. Pierce knew that opium was a stimulant to some, after certain effects wore off, when taken internally. He thought Blimy Johnson was wrong when he said that Rance smoked the stuff.

RANCE, swung on his heel and confronted Boozy Farrell, who had come through the mangroves lining the creek to look on. Boozy was not sober. He was laboring under excitement, anxious to conciliate.

"What in hell do you want?" demanded Rance.

"You're goin' to take me along, ain't you? You ain't goin' to leave me out of this, leave me behind on Paradise?"

"Leave you out of what?"

"Whatever lay you're on. I'm stewed most of the time, but not always. I ain't a fool, Rance. A boat comes driftin' in, you an' Pierce go off in his launch. Next thing the Elsie's bein' got ready. The four of you in cahoots. I'm left out of it. It ain't fair. You ought to count me in. It's only right. I suppose it's shell or pearls, or both. I ain't askin' an even break, but that boat come to Paradise of its own accord. Current brought it. If it had landed it would have been jetsam, belonged to all of us, equal. We're all whites together. They count Wong white in the islands. Take me along an' give me a bit of it."

"You damn sea-lawyer!" snarled Rance. "What have you done to have a share in it? What can you put in? You're not even able-handed. Give you your booze and you're no good. Keep you off it and you're a shaking nuisance. That boat didn't come ashore. It wasn't jetsam, it was flotsam, not

that that would make any difference. Why, you soak, you couldn't live away from Paradise. Give you twenty quid in a white man's port and you'd be dead of D. T.'s inside a week. Get out!"

"I can help you get a crew," whined Boozy. "You get drunk yourself, Mr. Rance. Gimme a show."

"I can hold my liquor, and I can do without it. I'm doing without it from now on," Rance declared and it sounded as if he meant it—for the time, primed with the hope of fortune. "We'll get a crew all right. A fine cheek you have, butting in."

Boozy Farrell wilted. Pierce was sorry for him, but he could not see him as a sharer. Rance's denunciation had been cruel, but it was true enough. Boozy was a derelict who had gone entirely native. He lacked the stamina to throw off the influence of surroundings that had environed him for years.

"I suppose you're right," Farrell said. "No harm in askin', is there? I'm just an old sot." Tears that must have been part gin were rolling down his dirty face. "I don't bear you no ill will. I'll help you line up your boys. You don't want to leave out Joni; he's the best diver on Paradise, handy everywhere. He can read and write, Joni can. I wish you luck, gents."

He shuffled off.

"That sniveling old remnant has lived on Paradise for over twenty years," said Rance. "Hasn't he, Blimy?" Johnson nodded. "Came here as trade agent when the pearling was good. Got canned. And he's stayed pickled ever since. When he can't get gin he drinks *ti-root akolehao* and *karwa*. They say Joni's his son. He don't look like a half-caste, but Boozy's dark himself. Boozy's first name is Johnny, all same Joni in native. When the kid was ten years old he went to the school that the missionary before Giddings started. Gid's been here eight years, all but six months. He brought his wife back from that leave, but Joni won't attend his church. You

can bet a boy of ten, a native, didn't have any yen for education. His father sent him; finally married the mother. She died of cholera. That right, Blimy?"

"That's wot Hi've 'eard."

"Joni's a good man to take, though. Come in handy. Boozy won't make trouble. He ain't got the nerve. Don't know anything, to begin with. Let's get the gear over from Wong's place."

"How are you going to get the Paradise boys back here?" asked Pierce. "The ones we have spoken to about going want to know."

Rance eyed him sardonically.

"They can ship from Papeete to Apia or Suva, can't they? We're paying them wages. They'll get back. Tell 'em so. Tell 'em we'll fix it."

Pierce resolved not only to tell them, but to see it was fixed, if he had to arrange it out of his own share. It was clear the others were callous enough concerning them. Wong had said nothing about returning. He kept his own counsel, but it was probable that his plans were made and that he would adhere to them.

They got eight boys, Joni among them, though it seemed that he was not overpopular. Rance said it was because of his successes with the native girls, on account of his white blood or the quicker wit that had come with it.

THEY left Paradise the next afternoon on the ebb, a light breeze aiding them which failed after they had got well clear of land, heading southwest. Besides the extra gear and their supplies—Rance calmly looting his store for much of it, claiming Yardleigh owed him back pay, which Pierce did not believe—they took what arms they could muster, two rifles, one of which was Wong's, a pistol apiece. Pierce left the shotgun behind. He left his stores intact, with a note of resignation. There was plenty of time before the next copra crop to send another man to take his place. Yardleigh would de-

liver the note, to be handed him by Marama. There was half a box of forty per cent dynamite aboard, with fuse and caps, used on the island for blasting reefs and fishing.

Wong took over one of the crew as combination steward and galley helper. He lost none of his dignity as cook and prepared an excellent supper, leaving it to the boy to serve, seating himself with the rest. They ate the meal at sunset, barely under steerage way, Rance and Blimy chafing about the weather, Wong imperturbable, Pierce accepting conditions sailorwise.

After the table was cleared he got out the only sailing chart of the South Pacific they had been able to find. It was stained, fly-specked, and torn, but Wong mended it with starch-paste and strips of paper, and they spread it on the table and bent over it.

Blimy had a bottle out, but he was the only one who drank.

"Prick it off and lay out our course, Jim," said Rance. Pierce got the dividers and parallel rules he had brought to Paradise, fished out the scrap of paper from his waistband.

"Smart trick, that of yours, Jim," said Rance. "Curse the wind!" he added irritably. "We're hardly moving. Now, where is this island?"

"It's northeast of New Zealand—that may account for its being actively volcanic. Southeast of the Kermadecs and Curtis Isle, close to where the International Date Line swings to 175° west from Greenwich. 173° 48' west and 33° 29' south," Pierce read off from the slip.

He worked for a minute or two and then made a tiny dot with his pencil.

"There she is," he announced. "The chart's clear all round it. If the trade holds we'll have good sailing, reaching. Even the Elsie will walk along at a good clip."

A sudden commotion broke out on deck, a native squabble, sounding through the open skylight. Pierce ran up on deck, followed by Rance.

Joni was in the grasp of two of the crew, jabbering at Farui, the older man Pierce had picked for mate, though Rance was nominally that.

"I tell him he no come along aft," said Farui. "He no belong this place. He say he no go along, I speak I all same make."

"Go for'ard, Joni," said Pierce quietly, but authoritatively. "You're not supposed to come this side of the mainmast unless you're ordered."

"That goddam *kanaka* not boss me," said Joni. "No *kanaka's* going to boss me." He was sullen, aggressive.

"That 'll do," said Pierce. "Get for'ard."

Joni glared, but his eyes fell and he walked away, shaking off the two who had held him and who followed, grinning at his discomfiture.

"You don't want to be too easy with 'em," said Rance.

"I'll be stiff enough when there's occasion," said Pierce. "There's no sense in making a fuss out of nothing. Joni's in my watch. I'll handle him."

There was not much wind, only errant puffs that the Elsie did not make much of. Pierce took the watch from eight until midnight. An islander named Puriti was at the wheel, doing well enough. It was not until the breeze strengthened and showed signs of constancy, that Pierce missed Joni. He was not on deck, not to be found. He had turned out with the watch but he was gone.

"Turned sulky and swam back," said Rance. "Nothing for him," he added, glancing at where Paradise still loomed up aft. "Just as well, though it leaves us one short. Good riddance, I'd say. He didn't get on with the others."

Pierce calculated they were about ten miles off the island. He knew that such a distance meant little to the native swimmers. They sometimes swam far out to sea to the fishing banks, pushing bait and lines on a tiny

raft, seemingly unafraid of sharks. Joni was well on his way. The schooner heeled to the wind and he ordered the sheets inhailed. By midnight, when he went below, the Elsie was making nine knots. It was all he had expected of her.

Blimy was softly playing his concertina, Rance shuffling for solitaire. Wong had disappeared. There was a faint reek of opium from the trade-room where he had elected to bunk. Wong smoked his drug. Farui was in charge.

"I'll write up the log and turn in," said Pierce. He had brought an unused account book for the record and in it he made his first professional entry. He could hardly be deemed an amateur now, if he did lack papers. He felt content as he added, with a flourish, the obsolete tag used by old skip-pers:

"So ends this day."

CHAPTER V.

THE ISLE OF PEARLS.

ALL hands watched for landfall. Pierce was perhaps the most anxious. He had no one to check his reckonings, he was not at all sure of the chronometer which he had set according to Paradise Island's longitude, and he had no tables for short cuts.

They had had an off-and-on trip, effecting repairs in the calm spells, until he was fairly well satisfied. The Elsie had no lines to brag about. There was nothing sweet about her entry or her run and she developed a nasty trick of hanging in the wind, coming about even when her headsails were held over; but, all in all, he had little fault to find with her, his first commercial craft—if their venture came within the lines of actual commerce.

Wong had never varied, always the same, bland outwardly, but with the remoteness of the Oriental, unfathom-

able. Pierce believed that Rance was drinking occasionally, but never openly. When they drifted he was irritable, always ready to bawl out Blimy for playing and singing sickly sentimental airs. Then he would go for a chat with Wong and come back pacified.

As far as might be, between two such varied types, Rance and Wong might be said to have chummed up. Blimy affected the same relationship with Pierce, by winks and nods, hints and innuendoes, and Pierce neither discouraged nor encouraged it. He might use Blimy. He had come to the conclusion that Rance and Wong were entirely unscrupulous. The Oriental was the greater mystery. How far Rance's greed might lead him was speculative. That he meant to return to his former life in the States was evident enough; whether he intended trying to restore his original status as a lawyer, doubtful. But greed gripped him. It glinted in the black eyes of Wong, it showed in the pale blue orbs of Blimy. Of the three, Pierce considered Blimy the least dangerous.

But they seemed to be all united when Pierce announced they should sight the island the following morning.

It was early, not yet six o'clock, and by his reckoning they were some sixty miles away. They had no binoculars. A *kanaka* was perched on the spreaders of the fore. The horizon ran blank in a dark line beyond the deep blue seas that flashed with sun-sparkle, creaming softly. They were reaching at eight knots.

Pierce felt their unspoken criticism as the log registered the miles and nothing showed on the ocean's rim. It was easy to miss, he realized and, beyond, there were hundreds of miles between them and New Zealand. He could hardly miss those two big islands, he told himself. It might be his fault or that of the chronometer of the Flying Scud which he had not dared to monkey with after its exposure on Dutch Shoals, beyond oiling with a lubricant

he feared was too heavy, but the only one available.

A hail came from the fore.

"Smoke!"

They made it out from the deck, a plume of it that might be that of a freighter, low down on the horizon. Rance called it that.

"Looks like you've missed it, Pierce," he said without the usual "Jim." His eyes were cold, his mouth sneering.

"I haven't given it up yet," Pierce answered evenly. "I've seen two flights of birds this morning. Gannets. They won't be far from land."

"From some guano rock. You said you were a navigator, Pierce. If you've bilked us—"

Pierce looked him in the eyes, their glances level. Rance had improved physically since he had left Paradise. Less liquor, a better appetite and regular meals, the stimulation of hope, had agreed with him; his opium eating did not seem to have done him any harm. He was a big man, bigger than Pierce, and there were about him certain indefinable marks that suggested that he had once been careful to keep himself in physical shape.

For a moment antagonism boiled up in Pierce and shouted for physical outlet. He wanted to take a punch at Rance, not just for the last remark, but a hundred cumulative things. He had been under a strain and there had been times when he wanted to smash Blimy's concertina and throttle his piping. Wong, too, with his everlasting mask of a face, through which his eyes seemed at times to see too deeply and yet retain too many secrets, had got on his nerves. He was far younger than any of them, not their equal in guile. But he got hold of himself.

"I never claimed to be an expert," he said. "I don't think I'm far out. Besides those birds, that smoke is too great to come from any freighter, even if we could see its funnel. It isn't oil or coal gas. It's more like steam

and fumes. Taura said the island was volcanic. I'm betting it's on more or less of a tear just now. Look at it."

THERE was a change in the smoke as they neared it. It changed shape continuously, brown and snowy white against the sky, broken through with bursts that turned it from a cauliflower-shaped cloud to shifting plumes that were blown to leeward. There was no land under it that could be called such, unless a vague hump that cored it was a peak or dome.

"Pierce is right, Gord blimy! Hit's the bloody hisland. 'E's 'it it first shot. [You hought to go crabbin' for a business, Rance, you'd halways 'ave stock to sell on 'and."

Rance clenched his fist, but Blimy stood his ground. He seemed to be deliberately challenging the other and there was a fierceness and resolution about him that surprised Pierce—a glimpse of gamecock quality, as his pudgy hand slid round toward his hip pocket.

"That is volcanic island," said Wong in his curious voice, deep, but singsong. "I have seen befo'. Not this, but two, thlee otheh."

The hail came from the spreaders again.

"Land ho! *Eyah!*"

"You're right, Jim," said Rance. "By God, we're there!"

He went swiftly forward, Wong following. It was apology enough. Pierce ignored Blimy's remark about Rance. He was wondering about anchorage and landing. The log held no instructions. Powers had left that out, his mate had not bothered about it.

It was not an inviting place. Above the sound of the heavy surf caused by the broken bottom they heard the bel-low of the volcano, if it could be dignified by that name. In a northeaster the seas, with the full force of the Pacific behind them, must have been terrific.

The belching crater, its wall rising

ribbed and precipitous, appeared to be fairly circular and about a hundred and fifty feet in height. Out of it rushed smoke and steam, the former in gushes that the steam broke up, the vapor blown toward them by the southwest trade, stinking with sulphur, choking when it rolled down on them in some vagary. All about it was a desolate flat of rock with a fumerole showing here and there, with a high wall or mesa thrusting east and west, split in places.

"Sounds like a fleet of battleships blowing off steam," said Blimy. The phrase was apt but insufficient.

They tacked and coasted along the desolate shores where the surf spouted high, looking for some entrance to a mighty reef, of rock or lava rather than coral, its serration rising like dripping fangs. If life was in the raw down here, Pierce told himself, scanning for a place to drop anchor, here was the earth itself as it all must have appeared in its early stages of convulsion.

This was the lee shore, until the monsoon changes came again, five months hence. Powers had landed. They could do the same. He hesitated to try the weather side, but there was no alternative. They were away from the suffocating fumes now, but the roar of the crater still topped the thundering breakers. He held out to round a cape on which myriads of gannets rested, rose and wheeled aloft.

Beyond the cape the full freakishness of the place revealed itself. The land fell away to the southwest, a broken ridge that ran laterally south from the tall mesa, a ridge clothed in bush, a mass of emerald and darker greens with purple shadows where ravines defied the sun, a jungle of undergrowth laced with vines, of tall trees standing out of the ruck of it. Along the shore line waving cocopalms, thickets of *fei*, a silver beach, a long lagoon like mottled green jade with its varying depths, a barrier reef where

the high surf of the rocky ramparts to the north was changed to sparkling fountains.

"Half Eden and half hell," Pierce said aloud. The lookout called down that he had found a gap in the reef. The force of the waves was wasted on its wall and, though long rollers went combing across the lagoon, they were spent by the time they reached the strand in lines of fretted lace.

They could hear yet the snorts, the shrieks and howls of the crater like a world in travail.

The awed and anxious faces of the *kanakas* cleared and they jumped to the sheets as the Elsie, behaving nimbly for once, as if she were on good behavior at such pleasant prospect of fair haven, came up into the wind and they slashed close-hauled for the opening.

"Velly plitty," said Wong smugly. He seemed more complacent than usual. His moon face shone. Rance's features were working with excitement. Blimy had dived below and came up with his infernal concertina. The wind blew away most of its jangle and his exultant song:

*"A life hon the hocean wyve,
A 'ome on the rolling deep,
Where the billowy waters ryve,
Hand the winds their vigils keep!"*

RANCE slapped Pierce on the back. "Good work. Not too bad.

There's where they got the beauties, out of that lagoon. You're not heading for the gate, man!"

"I'm not risking it at this stage of the tide. I don't like the look of it. I'm going to wait for full flood."

They could see the gap clearly. The tide rushed through it like a millrace, but not so evenly. There were swirls in it that told of humped bottom.

"You're the skipper," said Rance, not altogether pleasantly. He fell to gazing at the long lagoon as they drove through waves that were crisp and buoyant and dark of hue as full strength bluing laundry fluid.

There was no sign of Powers, of any human habitation. No smoke rose on this side. Yet the man must have been on the lookout for his Flying Scud, must have sighted them—unless he was sleeping through the bright, hot noon.

Save for the grim northern side, the plume of vapor blown to sea, the ever-present voice of the crater, this might well be called Paradise Isle, Pierce fancied. The lines of an old missionary hymn came to him. He had heard the natives singing it lustily at Giddings's little church:

*"Where every prospect pleases
And only man is vile."*

Not many men here besides those aboard. He glanced at his companions. What Wong saw in the glowing, sunlit picture, limned in primary colors, hued like the rainbow, was not evident; but Rance and Blimy Johnson saw nothing of the beauty, unless it was that of pearls ravished from the lagoon. Greed was stamped on their faces and brought out an innate ugliness. Blimy was not prepossessing at any time; now he looked like a red-faced, avaricious butcher. He shot a look at Rance that was crafty, half malignant.

Rance seemed all beaked nose and thin lips, eyes flat with desire. They wanted wealth, each for his own ends. Gold, to satisfy long-repressed appetites. Indulgence. And they wanted all they could lay their hands on, by hook or crook. They were like so many pirates in sight of loot, inhuman in their desire.

"I'm lucky if I get clear with my share," Pierce told himself, but he had his work in hand. It looked as if there was another gap in the reef ahead, opposite a split in the ridge. It was four o'clock and the shadows sketched the indication of a gorge running well back.

Again the lookout, perched like a monkey aloft, clad only in a scarlet *pareu*, shouted down in confirmation.

They came off it, held on for a full show.

There was an inner lagoon, barred from the outer by a ridge of sand through which there was a tiny channel that would be closed at slack and ebb. It wound back in a curve, the end lost to sight. It shone in the sun like a length of azure ribbon. Slopes thick with forest slanted up from it, save for where a cliff jutted out, bald and prominent.

Pierce gauged the second reefgate, liked the look of it, shouted his order.

"Hard alee! Ready about!"

The wheel spun, the booms swung, and the crew jumped to the headsails. The Elsie came round, hung for a moment and then gathered way.

Pierce took the wheel, giving commands.

They went in between the spouting portals on the shoulder of a comber, sheeted flat, the fore coming down with a rattle of hoops, staysail down, the main peaked, let fall between lazylines as the cable went out with the anchor in fourteen fathoms of crystal water.

They reefed and gasketed with the exuberance of a crew that has just won a close race.

The inner lagoon was the prize they had come to seek. Deep, by its color and the sharply sloping sides that might have once been crater walls. This was the older part of the island; the actively volcanic end was new. In time, if it subsided, it too would be robed majestically in the green mantle of peace and plenty.

"Gord blimy, we've myde it!" shouted Johnson, dancing on the deck.

THEY were shaking hands, all four of them, allied by the first win.

"Let's lick'er up before we go ashore," suggested Blimy. The crew were coiling up sheets and hanging halyard loops. Pierce had stood for prompt neatness from the first. The Elsie was not too trim, he wanted no

risk of snarls. He had slackened halyards and stays in every rain-squall, tautened them as the sun stretched them. He ordered a boat and went below. A drink seemed in full order.

"'Ere's to our blinkin' luck!" said Johnson. "Blimy, hit's time a ship of mine came 'ome." They clinked glasses in mutual accord.

The boat was swung out on the falls when they came on deck, but the *kanakas* stood to the ropes, motionless, the rest of them staring at the bald cliff. A figure stood there, in white, slight enough to be that of a boy. Rance shouted, waved a hand.

"That can't be Powers," said Rance. "It looks like a kid. Damn it, we need binoculars!"

"I think that all same *fahine*," said Farui.

The white-clad figure was waving back. Then it turned and ran over the summit of the cliff to disappear in the trees.

"By God, he's right!" said Rance. "It's a woman. A girl! By God!"

Pierce remembered the worn shoes in the cabin of the Flying Scud. They stood for a moment eying each other. Wong alone appeared indifferent. Each of the other three registered a different expression.

"Lower her," ordered Pierce. "We'll go ashore."

He hurried below to his own room and put on a coat over his singlet. First he adjusted a shoulder harness and slid his gun into the holster.

As he came into the main cabin he saw Blimy struggling with a shirt, his pyjamas kicked and thrown off.

"You prinkin', too?" he asked. "I ain't got time to shyve, damn it!"

Rance was dressing swiftly. Wong went to the trade room alleyway.

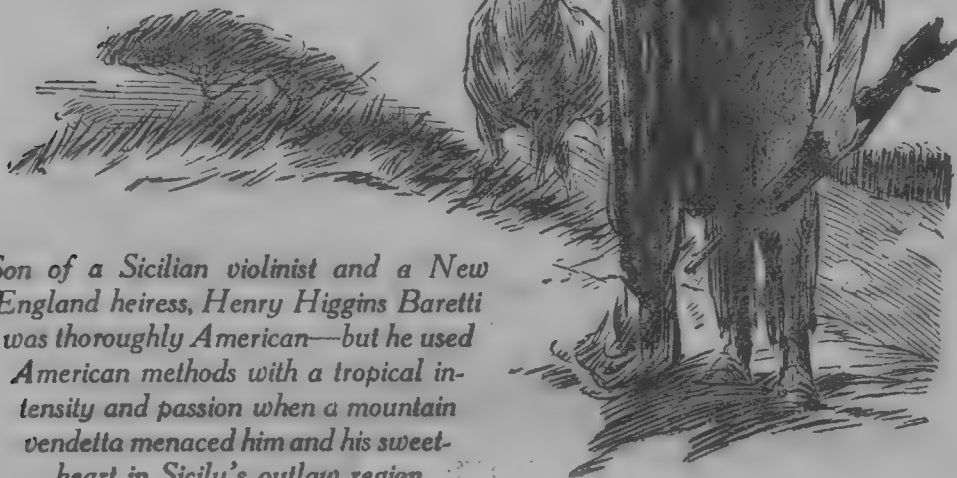
"I take a lil smoke," he said. "No likee white gel. Some Chinaman do. I diffelent. You go. I come plesently. We got plenty time now. I like takee easy."

Blue Blood and Red

By

JOSEPH IVERS LAWRENCE

Author of "The Master of Airlie,"
"Drums of Peace," etc.



Son of a Sicilian violinist and a New England heiress, Henry Higgins Baretti was thoroughly American—but he used American methods with a tropical intensity and passion when a mountain vendetta menaced him and his sweetheart in Sicily's outlaw region

Novelette—Complete

CHAPTER I.

FLIRTING WITH TROUBLE.

"HOLD on, Henry, I thought this was my party," objected Gordon Withers, assistant musical critic of the New York *Sphere*, in an aggrieved tone. "Why do you suppose I invited you here if it wasn't to act as interpreter? And you're doing nothing but talk like twenty yards of spaghetti. Bite it off, man, and say something in United States."

"The signorina is delighted," responded Henry Higgins Baretti, grinning insolently at his friend. "She thanks you for the write-ups, and me for the flowers. She thinks you are the most talented and distinguished critic in New York."

"And it has taken her fifteen minutes to say that? Come on, now, Henry, give somebody else a chance."

"Wait," said Henry, "while I tell

her that you are much obliged for her thanks, and that you insist that she is bigger and better among prima donnas than you are among critics. Those are your sentiments, eh?"

He turned his shoulder to his impatient friend, and again engaged the lovely little leading soprano of the Messina Opera Company in animated conversation—as animated as two persons speaking the Sicilian dialect can make a conversation.

"But is it not very interesting, Signor Baretti," she said, "that your father should come from Sicily, and from my own province? My father was a notary in Palermo, and it was not so long ago that he went to the mountains for his health and we made for ourselves a home in Ribotto. When I am again in Sicily I shall ask my father if he knew Signor Baretti, the great violinist—but no! your father has been so long away, you say."

"Signorina Donati!" interrupted a swarthy, black-mustached barytone who had just been singing the rôle of the heavy villain in the opera of "Lucia di Lammermoor." Apparently he didn't care if he carried his villainy into the dressing rooms, so fiercely did he scowl at Henry Baretto. "Signorina, there are many ladies and

for a week—ever since my friend here told me of the excellence of your work. I shall come again—every night—as long as you remain, Signorina Donati. If these people are so anxious to pay their respects to you and praise you, I really ought to get out of their way. But couldn't we continue our talk about Sicily and—other things—at



Henry calmly appropriated the disconcerted bandit's cloak and revolver

gentlemen here to meet you, if—if this gentleman would be so good as to—"

"No-no-no-no-no!" protested the girl impetuously touching Henry's arm with a dainty, slender hand, "you shall not go, *signore!* These other people, they will speak only English, and it is too charming to meet an American gentleman named Baretto who speaks Italian in the Sicilian dialect—whose distinguished father once lived in Ribotto. But—oh, you will come again? We shall stay here another week, the manager has said."

"Most certainly I shall come again!" Henry assured her with unusual warmth. "I was about to tell you that I've been here every night

luncheon or at dinner? You'd let me call for you at your hotel, and take you to luncheon to-morrow?"

Bianca Donati seemed very young, very shy, for an opera star, even in a small touring company, and she blushed enchantingly as she confessed that she could not decline so tempting an invitation.

Signor Stettino, the black-visaged barytone, glowered at Henry again as the latter turned away; and then Gordon Withers glowered at Henry in turn and insisted, as the two friends left the theater, that Henry had treated him very shabbily.

"I told you, you poor prune-of-Sicilian-extraction," the critic growled,

"that I had developed a real case on the lady. I wanted you to act as a friend, and interpret my romantic and lofty sentiments to her—and here you butt in and take it all for yourself." Henry only grinned.

HENRY'S mother, Mrs. Amanda Higgins Baretti, remarked at the dinner table one evening a week later that it was unusual for her son to go to the theater every night.

"Plays are elevating as well as amusing, if you select them with good judgment," she said solemnly. "What theater are you going to this evening, Henry dear?"

"The Jack-in-the-Box," he answered with an air of unconcern. "It's that little new theater uptown. There's an opera company there, from Sicily. They have been barnstorming the Italian quarters around town, but Withers played them up in his newspaper, and now they're going big with the Broadway crowd. It's 'Trovatore' this evening."

"You see!" exclaimed his father, Giovanni. "It is in the blood. He loves the operas that I loved in my youth. Now it is all German, the modern French, the terrible Russian, but he loves the old ones. Why was I not told of these compatriots of mine?"

"I scarcely thought of telling you, father. You would naturally prefer the Metropolitan."

"But I shall hear these Sicilians. Be so good as to reserve seats for your mother and me to-morrow evening."

Thus it was that Mr. and Mrs. Baretti occupied orchestra chairs at a modest performance of "Traviata." They did not know that Henry habitually sat in one of the small proscenium boxes, and did not see him until Giovanni found him nervously pacing the lobby during the first entr'acte. The young man explained that he had just dropped in for a few minutes, and his father deemed it quite proper and

Continental for a young gentleman to drop in for a glimpse of the opera.

"The little soprano—the *Violetta*—adorable!" his father remarked.

"Mm—er—yes, rather good-looking," Henry murmured absently, and his sire secretly lamented the cold blood of the New England side of the family.

After the final curtain the young man politely escorted his parents to their waiting motor, then excused himself and hurried off. Mrs. Baretti laboriously turned on the deep cushions and peered after her son through the crystal panel at the rear.

"He has gone up that alley, to the rear of the theater!"

"It is nothing, my dear. Doubtless he goes to meet his friend of the newspaper."

The lady seized the speaking tube and gave an order that stopped the car abruptly. She directed the chauffeur to drive to the other side of the street and wait there, thus mounting guard at the stage entrance—to the veiled disgust of her husband.

After an uncomfortable silence they saw Henry emerging from the alley—tenderly, protectingly, almost possessively escorting the petite Signorina Bianca Donati.

"Ah!" breathed Mrs. Baretti tragically.

"The little soprano!" exclaimed Giovanni, with something that the acute wife suspected to be elation.

"Be still!" she commanded, and watched her son as he wafted the fairy princess into a taxi. "Follow that taxicab, Otto!" she thundered in the speaking tube, and the big car lumbered away from the curb and took after the smaller craft with elegant efficiency.

The chase was not long, and it led, not to one of the glamorous palaces of jazz, but to the dignified restaurant of an immense new hotel. Henry was seen to hand the dainty Sicilian from the cab and float with her under a

canopy to the entrance. His mother navigated her flagship by means of the speaking tube and effected a landing at once.

"The place, you will agree, has the merit of respectability," Giovanni observed. "It is quite proper and safe. Shall we, then, go home, my dear?"

"We shall not. We shall have supper here. But you needn't be afraid of a scene."

THEY established themselves three tables away from the one occupied by their son and his fair guest, Amanda contriving to seat herself in a position for observation.

Presently Henry's waiter brought little silver dishes covered with bell glasses, and Giovanni twisted about and stared curiously.

"Breast of chicken *sous cloche*, with *champignons!*" he whispered ecstatically, and smacked his lips.

"Rich fare for a person that has probably lived on spaghetti and polenta all her life," rejoined Amanda sourly.

Her uneasiness increased as she saw her son pay his supper check and return the waiter a sum of money that was acknowledged with nothing short of an Oriental salaam. The young gallant bowed politely to his father and mother as he left the restaurant, and the flutter of excitement that stirred the parties at a score of tables as Bianca floated from the room in all her dainty loveliness added nothing to Amanda's enjoyment of the evening.

On the way home Giovanni dared not protest against the impending scene, but took refuge in affectations of prodigious fatigue, stretching himself with weary groans and yawning ostentatiously.

"Don't be vulgar!" snapped his wife. "Can't you be tired and sleepy in a respectable manner?"

Henry did not keep them waiting long, and when he came in and halted in the arched doorway of the drawing-room he was received by his mother

with Victorian majesty. She did not beat about the bush, but intimated at once that supper parties and all such attentions to persons of the stage must cease from that very moment.

"You have an attractive fortune and a high social position, my son. These so-called artists—actresses and the like—they are scheming and mercenary, all looking for willing victims like you."

Henry was not impudent, but the smile that spread slowly over his countenance was subtly suggestive—so much so that Giovanni Baretti's wife bridled and fidgeted.

There had been a flutter of polite excitement in certain circles of New York society back in 1898, when Amanda Higgins married the young and handsome foreign concert violinist. He hailed from Palermo, and it was unkindly hinted about that his home was in the mountains back of Palermo, where the Sicilian peasant and the Sicilian goat flourish together.

Amanda had just inherited the famous Higgins paints and varnishes, with three million in cash. She was no longer in the first flush of youth, and her figure had passed the merely plump stage, but she was a patroness of the arts, and from a Carnegie Hall box she fell discreetly, but resolutely, in love with the dashing musician.

So Giovanni ceased to fiddle in public, and became, in the course of years, a comfortable New York gentleman, president of the Higgins Paint and Varnish Company, with an appropriate rotundity of figure and a dignity in keeping with his station.

Henry Higgins Baretti, sole issue of the picturesque union, was named after his maternal grandfather. After his graduation from Harvard in 1923 he was initiated at once into the hidden mysteries of business, and incarcerated in a plate glass cell of his own, adjacent to a similar inclosure ornamentally occupied by his sire.

Amanda regarded her tall and

handsome son's ironical smile with nervous disapproval.

"Not all professional musicians turn out to be as respectable as your dear father," she managed at last. "He was naturally an aristocrat; our case was exceptional."

"You mustn't take all my actions so seriously, mother. You may be sure that if I ever select a professional musician for my serious attentions, she shall be—well, 'naturally an aristocrat.' I shall profit by your example."

"Ah-ha!" cried Giovanni with indiscreet levity. "Bravo! bravo!"

"Be still!" snapped the lady. "Don't be an idiot!"

BIANCA was advertised by her press agent as a peasant prima donna of a peasant opera company, but her bewitching appearance suggested nothing more exotic than a typical figure of Fifth Avenue or the Paris boulevards when she was dressed for luncheon in a New York hotel. Henry glowed with pride as he contemplated her across the table.

He regarded her perfect hands, with their delicate, tapering fingers, and inquired with fond irony if her humble home was to be, for the summer, among the hotels of the Riviera or in the Tyrol.

"But no, *signore!*" she protested a little severely. "It's all true, what you have read. I shall go to my village home in the mountains. We are simple people—we have two servants, but that means nothing in Sicily. We have very little money. I have made a little here in America, and I am glad; I shall give my father and mother some nice presents."

"You shall see!" Henry cried gayly. "Watch your mountain road. You'll see me riding up the trail on a donkey some fine day, or in a flivver. I promise I'll be there, if you want me to come."

A week later the Messina Opera Company embarked on an Italian steamship, and Bianca found her state-

room banked with flowers, gifts of fruit, and various packages.

Henry came aboard to say good-by, and she received him in the stateroom, chaperoned by a plump, middle-aged contralto who had sung the rôles of *Azucena* and *Maddalena* to Henry's uncritical satisfaction during the short season.

As the bugle sounded and a steward came past the stateroom warning visitors ashore, Bianca held out her hand, and Henry seized it and refused to let go. The chaperone excused herself, and Henry was emboldened to envelop the small hand in both of his large ones. Then, startlingly and unaccountably, Bianca began to cry, and the astonished young man found himself clasping her slender form in his arms.

She began to sob convulsively, and when she raised her eyes timidly to gaze at him through a flood of tears, he saw only her pathetically trembling lips, and he, the somewhat puritanical son of an extremely puritanical mother, experienced the first utterly rapturous kiss of his life.

Another moment, and he was bounding up and down on the pier like a jumping jack, casting dignity to the winds of the North River as he waved his hat to the adorable creature that leaned over the rail high above him.

"I'll be there—I'll come—soon!" he shouted, heedless of highly amused persons about him and the noise that drowned his voice.

At first he did not notice the dark and sinister figure that hovered near Bianca, but he suddenly became conscious of the baleful glare of a pair of large and eloquent eyes. Stettino, the barytone, was looking down on him malevolently.

The ship moved, and the girl stretched out her arms in a tender appealing gesture. Then Stettino said something to her, something rude and harsh, to judge from his darkly flushed face and his gestures.

Henry saw her shrink from the man, looking angry and distressed, but Henry did not permit the incident to dampen his ardor: he waved his arms wildly and tossed kisses into the air.

Then Stettino leaned over the rail and addressed him fiercely in sign language. A Neapolitan is said to be able to talk for half an hour without opening his mouth, but a Sicilian can do it half a day; and Henry gathered from the barytone's acrobatics that he felt toward him every known variant of jealousy, contempt, hatred, and hostility.

Henry had no proficiency in the sign language of his father's race, but American schoolboys are not without their resources in that direction, and he was moved by sudden impulse to put his thumb to his ear and waggle his fingers in a flapping motion. It was a simple, crude act, and he felt himself to be ridiculous and childish, but the other man took it far from lightly: he rolled his eyes grotesquely, mouthing awful, though inaudible, oaths and threats, and bounced up and down like the chimpanzee in the cage at the zoo.

Bianca spurned the villain, much as she had done in the various operas a score of times, and showed her defiance by turning toward the young man on the pier and wafting him a kiss from her dainty finger tips.

HENRY tried to think connectedly as he walked slowly up the pier after the last yearning look at the departing ship. The dark villain was forgotten as his thoughts centered on the last tremendous moment in the stateroom. He recalled how he, the erstwhile sober and unromantic son of his New England mother, had addressed the little prima donna as his idol, his sweetheart.

He went home to dinner that night with a half-formed idea of making an announcement that would startle the calm and well-regulated household,

but the sight of his mother sweeping regally into her accustomed place gave him a strange jolt, and he postponed the event to some later time.

"You seem nervous and agitated this evening, Henry," said Amanda. "What makes you appear so strange?"

"Strange!" he exclaimed. "Do I? It's nothing at all. I was thinking. I've half a mind to go abroad this summer. England, you know—France and Germany. Perhaps Italy, and all the other places."

"I suppose you ought to travel," she allowed, but looked a bit uneasy.

"You would come back another man!" his father asserted. "I should prepare a plan for you—Venice, Florence, Milan, Rome. As for Sicily—I don't know! See Palermo, if you care to, and let it go at that. The mountains would be a waste of time, and I've heard there are still brigands there, though Mussolini has accomplished many reforms. Sicily is no longer my home. I am transplanted to the soil of the New World—I am an American; my home is here. Those Sicilian opera singers," Giovanni murmured a moment later. "I wonder if they have returned to their native land already."

Amanda glanced sharply at her son, but he was busily engaged in proving that his appetite was up to normal.

"Not likely they'd return to Sicily," she told her husband. "Not after they've learned the feeling of American dollars. I dare say they're in Hollywood by this time, posing for the moving pictures."

CHAPTER II.

THE MAFIA.

AMANDA had a letter from her son in June, written at Naples. It gave her interesting facts about that city, and dwelt upon the beauties of the adjacent island of Capri.

In actual fact, the writer had found Naples interesting chiefly because a line of steamboats plied between that port and Palermo.

He called on the United States consul in Naples and consulted him about an address in his notebook: Signorina Bianca Donati, Ribotto, Province of Trapani, Sicily.

The official pointed to a saffron-hued patch on the map which represented the province of Trapani.

"Probably a day's journey from Palermo," he said, "and doggoned rough going, I'll tell the world. Mussolini has done a slick job cleaning up the Mafia; they're afraid of 'im down there, but he hasn't turned every mountaineer into a monk or a poultry farmer. It wouldn't be a bad idea to take a policeman along with you. Tourists used to take along a whole squad of 'em, you know, when they went into the mountains."

There was a polite consul in Palermo who introduced Henry to a high police official. The latter declared that the rugged mountains had been cleaned of bandits and the like, but intimated that it was always possible to run onto a stray specimen of the genius.

He thought an armed escort would be a handy thing to take along, and he assigned to the American traveler's service a picturesque little sergeant of Carabinieri, with plumed chapeau, saber, carbine, and a display of gold lace and brass buttons.

Henry had ample funds and credits, and he delighted the sergeant by visiting an American automobile agent in Palermo and buying a small runabout for the trip into the hills. The sergeant had previously declared that only a jackass could negotiate the trails and passes of Trapani, and that he had a cousin who rented saddle and pack donkeys to tourists, but the flivver appealed to Henry's sense of comfort.

For a city somewhat remote from

the beaten paths of travel, Palermo is proudly up to date, and so motor-minded that it has leaped into the glory of paved highways, automobile clubs, gas stations, and English tea rooms; but the illusions which these features created for Henry were rudely dissipated by a few miles of mountain road. The little sergeant stood the bumps and skids with cheerful sportsmanship, but Henry would have been pleased to swap the car with any passing peasant for a couple of the slow, sure-footed donkeys of the region.

The sergeant kept fast hold of the side of the car as a precaution, but never ceased to invite the attention of his host to the beauties of mountain scenery and the charming glimpses of the ocean as the journey led them higher and higher into the uplands of the island. Henry politely acknowledged the charms of the country, but reserved his close attention for the road and the vagaries of the cranky vehicle, which seemed to resent the departure from the paved ways of the city.

Peasants of the highlands stepped aside, doffed their caps, and stared at the car and its occupants—doubtless impressed by their hardihood; and the sergeant never failed to wave them still farther back, indicating plainly that a great man was traveling under his protection.

Toward evening they bumped into the tiny village of Ribotto, a mountain hamlet, and the car was halted at the inn, a medieval hostelry of stone and red tiles, with a courtyard, garden, and some tables and benches in front of the entrance.

It appeared to Henry like a stage set for a drinking chorus of an Italian opera. A goat, two pigs, and some ducks and chickens were scrabbling about the garden, and half a dozen villagers were distributed among the tables and benches.

The pudgy, aproned innkeeper hurried out to welcome the guests, bowing and scraping as for royalty. Henry

requested shelter and refreshments, and the man, volubly protesting that he was honored beyond his deserts, assigned them a shed beside the inn for a garage, then conducted them to rooms overlooking the garden.

They returned at once to the tables in the shady yard for food and drink, while a chore boy unloaded their luggage from the car. Loungers gathered about them with frank curiosity and commented freely upon the appearance of the American, who was quite obviously, they declared, a politician or a cinema magnate of great wealth.

HENRY asked the host to direct him to the house of Signorina Donati.

"Ah, the *signore* is then one of the great managers from America! The *signorina* lives in a fine house. You shall see! She has made much money in America."

The loiterers listened and whispered among themselves, and as the boy shouldered a small locker trunk they remarked quickly that the name upon it was not American, but Italian.

"Baretti!" exclaimed the innkeeper. "But that was a name once well known in Ribotto! Our Giovan' Baretti—he was a great violinist. He went away to America and never came back. Great artists make fortunes in America and come back to build villas in our hills, but Giovanni did not return. It may be that he died—peace to his soul; it may be that he became a politician in those United States."

"But Giovanni Baretti is my father!" cried Henry. "He has said that his home was near Palermo, in the province of Trapani. He has been away from here a long time—and you still remember him!"

A remarkably sinister-looking native rose from a bench and slouched forward to peer insolently into Henry's face. He was of the classic Saracenic type of Sicily, and a fine example of brigand.

3 A

"I remember Giovan' Baretti," he said, with an ominous scowl. "I am Orsino Scaduto. It is a name well known to those of the Baretti family. Your father went to America, *signore*, because a Scaduto and a Baretti cannot live upon the island of Sicily at the same time."

Henry was thunderstruck, but he laughed, treating the dramatic announcement as a joke.

The large eyes of Scaduto, however, held no gleam of humor. He nodded toward the car in the shed, then pointed to the highway, indicating plainly that Henry was to leave without delay.

Fresh from the metropolis of the modern world, Henry found the situation something new and puzzling, but he laughed again and shrugged his shoulders; whereat Scaduto slipped a hand under his jacket with a suggestion of having a knife handy, and took another step forward.

The little sergeant, evidently enjoying the dramatic scene, now came to life officially. He drew his saber with a flourish, and interposed his comparatively diminutive form between the two men, standing as a symbol of law and order.

He ordered the villager to cease annoying the noble American gentleman and leave the inn yard without further parley, in the king's name, the name of the exalted Mussolini, the name of the mighty Fascismo.

Orsino Scaduto obeyed, but with ominous dignity, fixing fiery eyes in a baleful glare upon Henry as he did so.

The sergeant grinned happily, and saluted Henry with the saber, assuring him that he had cleared the atmosphere of all danger and unpleasantness; but the innkeeper and the remaining loungers shook their heads and exchanged significant glances.

The travelers applied themselves to the repast spread before them, but there came quickly another interruption in the shape of a dignified gentleman dressed all in white linen, with a

wide-brimmed Leghorn hat, who looked like one of Palermo's smart set, or a wealthy tourist from the mainland.

"Behold!" whispered the innkeeper, "the gentleman is the distinguished barytone of the opera, Signor Remualdo Stettino. He has a villa at Taormina, since his great triumph in America."

"I have the honor of the gentleman's acquaintance," said Henry, but the host did not catch the irony in the speech.

THEN the glance of the sedate and apparently contented barytone fell upon Henry, and he became violently agitated.

"You!" he cried. "It is here that we meet again! It is here, perhaps, that you will again flap your hands at me from your ears! The gesture is natural to you! It is a pity that your ears did not grow longer, like those provided by nature for your kind."

Henry smiled, genuinely amused by the excessive heat of the man's temper.

"Sorry I hurt your feelings so deeply, *signore*," he said, "but I'll tell you what to do: you waggle your fingers at me the same way, and that will square accounts between us for the time being."

"You mock me, then!" cried Stettino, growing white with rage. He moved forward belligerently, found his progress blocked by a heavy bench, but magnificently struck an attitude and flung his chamois gloves in Henry's face.

"Have a care, *signore*!" the startled sergeant warned the irate intruder, and got up from his seat with his hand on the hilt of his saber.

"I have seen the gentleman perform before," Henry informed the sergeant quietly. "There's nothing really bad about him, I believe, but he thinks he is hard-boiled. Now, don't put on any more operatic stunts till I've finished my dinner," he added to Stettino. "I'm tired and hungry. And you

may have your gloves; I don't want them."

He quickly rolled the gloves into a hard little ball, and flipped them at their owner. The aim was excellent, and the ball landed precisely on the tip of the barytone's nose.

From the rear of the yard came a chorus of harsh guffaws of deep appreciation.

Stettino seemed to be in the throes of a convulsion. His face went from white to purple, and he muttered and gasped, unable to express himself coherently.

At last—

"If I die, I shall be buried!" he gasped, quoting an ancient Sicilian saying. "If I live, I shall kill you!"

It affected the sergeant profoundly, and he seemed disappointed and disturbed at the American's lack of excitement or awe.

"Those words, they are of the *Omeria*," he said solemnly to Henry. "You must not laugh, *signore*! It is all the same, you must understand, that you are marked for death by the Mafia."

Still Henry was not sufficiently impressed.

"Get Signor Mussolini on the phone for me," he said facetiously. "I want to ask him more about this Mafia business. He has said that it is stamped out, that Sicily has been gone over with a vacuum cleaner; and I have the word of one of your superior officers for it, sergeant."

The little soldier expressed polite but emphatic doubts, in a series of shrugs and gestures. The incident threatened to degenerate into an argument, but the enraged barytone got breath enough to deliver some further information.

"LA MAFIA," he said hoarsely, "is not a secret society, a gang, a band of brigands, as you may think in your ignorance, you American pig! It is—ah—a condition of

mind. Any man who suffers a great injury at the hands of another—who then cherishes a consuming hate—that man becomes a Mafioso!"

"You make it interesting," said Henry. "You have joined the Mafia, then, within the last five minutes, I take it."

"The man who talks enough says nothing!" declaimed Stettino sagely. "But—blood washes out blood. He who makes debts pays them!"

"Blood?" Henry queried. "I say, did I give you a nosebleed with those chamois gloves?"

Again the sergeant came to the relief of ignorance.

"It is the same thing, *signore*—a grave injury indeed to strike a man in the face with gloves or any object. He threw his gloves at you, and you should have challenged him at once to give you satisfaction as a gentleman. Throwing them back again, and at the nose, is a great insult; the situation is very grave."

"If you would continue to live," said Stettino in an awful voice, "take yourself without delay from this island. And be sure that you make no attempt to see or speak with the Signorina Donati, or you shall learn more of the Mafia than you will enjoy knowing—and before another sunrise. Of the law and the Mafia, the first-named is not the more to be feared. I have no more to say."

"Take care, *signore*," the soldier warned him again. "The American gentleman is under my protection, by the order of the prefect of police."

"*Pouf!*" spluttered the barytone deservingly, blowing out his cheeks, and turned away with a fine shrug to stalk out of the yard.

The rooster feathers on the little man's chapeau seemed to rise and stiffen.

"The pig, the goat!" he cried. "He insults me when I am in uniform and on duty—when I can do nothing."

"Never mind," Henry said sooth-

ingly. "Some day when you're off duty, you can go and say '*Pouf!*' at him, and he may have another spasm and die. Oh, Signor Stettino," he called cheerfully after the departing enemy, "if it's part of the game I'll consider myself a member of the Mafia, beginning now. Don't interfere again with my sight-seeing tour, or I'll knock both of your ears round to the back of your head. We prefer fists in America, because we always have them with us."

CHAPTER III.

DEADLY INSULT.

THE travelers applied themselves once more to the neglected refreshment, and Henry's appetite seemed by no means impaired by the exciting interlude; but it appeared that there could be no peace or tranquillity for them in the sleepy-looking little village of Ribotto.

The hostile Orsino Scaduto returned to the scene, and brought three swarthy, desperate-looking fellows with him. Halting outside the hedge that surrounded the garden, he pointed a quivering finger at the American, and his companions stared fixedly, then solemnly raised their right hands and held them toward Henry, with forefingers and little fingers extended.

"Behold, *signore*," cried the innkeeper, "it is the sign of evil that they make against you! It is as if the evil eye had been cast upon you!"

The sergeant whipped out his saber and charged on the four peasants, dispersing them, but he turned back to warn Henry that an even more serious turn had come to the already grave conditions. It amounted to nothing less than being involved in a mountain vendetta.

The honest innkeeper pondered gravely and recalled vague memories of the past. It was possible, he sug-

gested, that the Signor Giovanni Baretto, the violinist, had gone to the Continent and to America at a time when he could have remained in Sicily only by vanquishing the entire Scaduto clan. A Sicilian vendetta, he explained, was hardly a matter of one generation of a family, or two, or three; it went on forever. A stranger to the land and its people would be rash indeed to take up a feud of which he knew nothing at all.

"But I'm an American citizen!" Henry protested vehemently, with a truly American contempt for all unfamiliar foreign customs and institutions. "Don't think for a minute that I'm going to be scared out of a little mountain town like this by a handful of street loafers, or an operatic villain with a barytone voice. You might explain to those fellows out there that I'll take on any two or three of them, catch as catch can, and the others can line up and wait their turns. I played football at Harvard, and I don't mind a little rough stuff. But if the whole province of Trapani gathers around here to make it interesting for me I'll wire the United States consul at Palermo, and he will take the matter up with Rome; and if it becomes necessary I'll have the united armies of Italy and the United States, with a bunch of warships and airplanes, come down here and give this island a regular house-cleaning guaranteed to remove the dandruff from the hair!"

"The situation is indeed serious, *signore*," sighed the sergeant, "but bear in mind, if you please, that I am here in my official capacity, and there is no need of aid from abroad. If it is your pleasure to remain, I stand beside you, and there is nothing to fear."

The innkeeper's fears were not allayed by the sergeant's valiant declaration, but he was presently persuaded to brave an expedition through the streets to conduct his guest to the villa of the prima donna.

The trio—the American walking boldly, and the two natives rather furtively—passed along the narrow, rocky, dusty street, among half-naked children and browsing goats, till they came suddenly upon a handsome little stucco villa set in a pretty garden. The guide announced with a sigh of relief that it was their destination, and the sergeant ceremoniously waved Henry into the garden and took his post at the gate as a sentinel.

The American passed through a bower of roses and honeysuckles and knocked at the door. A neat peasant maid responded, dropped a curtsy, and ushered him into a fairly spacious living room. He gave her his card, and she disappeared, leaving him to admire the simple arrangement of quaint furniture and decorations.

Bianca appeared in the doorway, her eyes wide with astonishment and pleasure, then tripped forward on dainty toes. She started to greet the visitor with a sweeping bow, but he held out his arms and she rushed into them with a little cry of joy, and kissed him.

FOR the moment Henry Higgins Baretto was all Italian, or all Sicilian—and that's a very different matter, according to Sicilians. His rapture was Mediterranean, and had in it nothing of the restraint of the Higgins family or their Puritan traditions.

There were whispered questions, answers, and tender reproaches. Why had he come so secretly and abruptly? Why had she isolated herself in such a mountain wilderness?

She made excuses for the village of Ribotto. Her devotion to her parents was the explanation; they were rooted in their native mountains, and she had pledged herself to give them a comfortable and attractive home. It was small and plain, she admitted, but to her father and mother it was a palace for a royal duke.

She extricated herself from an ar-

dent embrace and flitted out to fetch the venerated older folk. They were refined and courteous mountain people, simple and rather quaint; but Henry quickly reflected that his own sire sprang from the same soil. He was frankly, heartily accepted as the lover of the incomparable Bianca, and they received him with the same honors that they might have accorded a prince or an archbishop.

Suddenly a rear door of the house was banged violently, and a stalwart young peasant, rather elaborately attired in peasant finery, strode belligerently into the center of the group.

Bianca's father protested gently at the boisterousness of the unceremonious visitor, but the girl herself was astonished and angry. She stepped back and said coldly:

"Signor Baretto, this is Signor Beppe Scaduto."

The name was startling, but Henry smiled casually and held out his hand. Beppe Scaduto glared at him, a good deal like a rude, unmannerly school-boy, then put his hands behind his back and said savagely:

"A Scaduto does not take the hand of a Baretto! A Scaduto does not let a Baretto enter the house of his friends."

The temperamental Bianca flew into a handsome rage. She darted at the young man as if to tear and rend him, and he retreated. She stormed like a young fury, and ordered him to leave the house, never to enter it again. He clapped his cap to his head and went, giving Henry a look of deadly significance as he passed out.

Apologies for the scene were profuse, but Henry took it so lightly that Bianca was charmed with his evident indifference to danger. The father and mother retired from the room, grumbling their disapproval of the whole Scaduto race, and Henry took his sweetheart in his arms again and instantly forgot the menace of the celebrated Sicilian vendetta.

The sergeant waited patiently outside, smoking a cigarette and musing upon the vagaries of the dramatic world in which he lived. He was guarding with efficiency the main portal of the villa, and knew nothing of arrivals or departures through the rear door.

He grinned with sentimental satisfaction when he saw the American emerge slowly, holding the hand of the beautiful maiden and obviously reluctant to let go of it.

Another observer witnessed the holding of hands. Young Beppe was concealed behind a hedge across the highway, and he clenched his fists and gnashed his teeth at the sight.

Henry came away as jaunty as a Romeo, and slapped the soldier on the back with the camaraderie of the happy lover. They started off for the inn, but were intercepted by Beppe, who stepped from the hedgerow and delivered a fiery ultimatum.

The American-Sicilian Baretto, who he declared was a sort of mongrel for which his contempt was of the most profound, could prolong his term of life, if he wished to do so, only by quitting instantly the island of Sicily, the kingdom of Italy, and the continent of Europe.

The sergeant ordered Beppe to move on, but the young peasant suddenly stepped close to Henry, seized him by the shoulders, and fastened his teeth on the lobe of his right ear. It was done like a flash, and like a flash Beppe darted away, leaving the hedge.

UTTERLY astounded, Henry clapped his hand to his ear. He applied his handkerchief, and a blood stain quickly spread upon it. He glanced at the sergeant in wonderment, then laughed at the sheer absurdity of the incident.

"You know, *signore*," said the soldier mournfully, "that to bite the ear is of the most deadly of insults. It means that you shall now seek to kill

this fellow, or assuredly he will kill you. It is the declaration of war to the death."

"What's the proper technique?" Henry inquired. "Am I supposed to kill him by chewing his ears off, or go for the throat and make quicker work of it?"

"One does not jest when the ear has been bitten, *signore*."

"I don't want you to think I'm fool enough to look at it as a merry little prank," said Henry, still holding the kerchief to his ear; "but I haven't anything against this Scaduto boy that should make me go after his life. If he comes around, however, whetting his teeth for my other ear, I'll show him one of the uses of the toe of the boot in America."

The soldier shook his head ominously and examined the safety lock of his carbine as they started for the inn. The evening was chilly, and they supped in the stone-paved kitchen of the inn. There was little conversation, for Henry attached more significance to the hostility of Stettino and the men of the Scaduto clan than he cared to admit, and the sergeant maintained an air of official dignity and vigilance. After the meal the host lighted them to their respective rooms with candles, and prayed devoutly for their serene and untroubled sleep.

The accommodations were primitive, but Henry was weary and prepared to retire at once. He looked out of the single window into the black darkness of the garden without fear, then placed the candle on the table at the back of the room.

In turning away from the window he escaped a rain of buckshot which shattered the casement. The ancient opalescent glass crashed and tinkled on the floor, and the sash was splintered into matchwood. An old mirror on the side wall was knocked down, riddled, and the plaster was studded with shot.

The landlord and the soldier dashed in with candles, both crouching low

to avoid exposure to another fusillade. The sergeant was in shirt and trousers, but he clutched his saber and carbine and valiantly he threw himself on his knees below the window ledge and pumped shot after shot into the darkness.

For a quarter-hour he stuck to his post, reloading and firing intermittently at what seemed to be moving shadows. When Henry began heartlessly to chaff him on his futile methods of warfare, he ceased firing and retired to his room with injured dignity.

Henry sat down on the bed and did some practical thinking. Presently he took an automatic pistol from his kit bag and placed it under his pillow, then moved a chest of drawers against the door and lay down to rest.

CHAPTER IV.

ABDUCTION.

IN the morning he inspected the premises with the landlord and the sergeant, but they found no clues to the identity of the attacking party. The only souvenirs of the battle were the handiwork of the soldier with his carbine, and the host wagged his head mournfully over a splintered table-top and a shattered Majolica tankard that he had carelessly left on a table.

Henry had come to Sicily in that vaguely ecstatic state of mind common to lovers, in which no definite plans are matured save for a general scheme of eternal bliss. He had made an engagement with his best-beloved to see her again in the morning, but for nothing more important than a renewal of vows and protestations. Now, however, he felt that a definite course of action was imperative.

A reasonably cautious man would unquestionably leave the neighborhood of Ribotto before the Scaduto buckshot chanced to reach him. He had come a courting, however, and the courting was not to be abandoned

without certain desired results. If he could not safely remain for a season of wooing, he must alter his plans in such a way that the object of his pilgrimage would accompany him in an orderly retreat. Instead of returning to America to break the news of a betrothal to his mother, he would present that unsuspecting lady with a daughter-in-law.

Firmly resolved, he set out for the villa, the sergeant marching as advance guard. Almost at once a young peasant—a Scaduto, without doubt—appeared on the highway and made mysterious signals to unseen prowlers. The soldier shouted and brandished his carbine, and the man slunk away.

The villa, however, was reached without further demonstration, and with the Higgins temperament in the ascendant Henry told Bianca at once of his plan. She offered some becomingly demure objections to his haste, but he was insistent. He would not leave Ribotto without her, and it appeared that if he were forced to wait long there might be no bridegroom for the wedding. The Scaduto clan numbered many, while he was the sole representative of the Baretti faction on the scene.

The parents were summoned and told of the proposal, and they were sorrowful, but plainly overawed by the obvious eligibility of the suitor. They sighed profoundly, but ratified the contract with all its conditions, and they embraced the young man as he left to go to the inn and make ready for early departure.

Henry and the soldier were marching briskly down the street, when Beppe Scaduto leaped from behind a tree and thrust savagely at the American's breast with a stiletto. Henry threw himself back in time to escape the lunge, then plunged forward and tackled Beppe about the knees, rolling him in the dust.

The Sicilian made wild jabs with the stiletto as Henry mauled him, but

Henry caught his wrist and bent it till the bones almost snapped, and soon disarmed him.

With purely Yankee-doodle methods he gave the young peasant a one hundred per cent beating, and presently had him gasping for breath and groaning in mental and physical anguish.

"Now, just try to get this into your head," growled the victor, holding the vanquished by the neck. "I didn't come to Sicily to look for the blood of any one, and I'm not going to start in making war with knives and shotguns, no matter how much that might please you. But you tell your old man, and all your brothers and cousins, that I'll come around if they force me to it, and knock hell out of every member of the family, one by one, so they'll still be on crutches when I'm home in the United States forgetting them."

As a fitting finale to the performance he turned the young man around and sent him flying down the street with a vigorous kick on the seat of his velveteen breeches.

The sergeant laughed immoderately in huge enjoyment and admiration.

"It was magnificent, *signore*. In Palermó I have seen such things in the cinema plays from America. The American gentlemen always avenge their honor with the fist, but even in the Signor Charlie Chaplin pictures I never saw a gentleman more of an artist with the hand and the foot."

At the inn Henry ran the car out of the shed and set about the arrangement of his luggage. While he made hurried trips between the car and his room with bags and boxes the sergeant mounted guard as usual.

From the center of the village came riding Orsino Scaduto and three henchmen in cavalcade, mounted on small saddle mules, the last man in the column leading a riderless mule. The soldier stood ready with his carbine,

but they rode past the inn at a trot, without deigning to notice him, and disappeared around the bend in the road.

He shrugged his shoulders and lighted a cigarette, but before he had taken a dozen puffs he was startled by a woman's shrill screams and calls for help.

He dashed to the bend in the road just in time to see five men galloping away from the Donati villa, with Bianca struggling in the arms of one of them.

He ran hard, shouting and firing his carbine in the air, but it was too late for such a demonstration to be effective.

Henry, in his room, heard the shooting, and he grabbed his pistol and ran out, only to meet the sergeant sprinting back in a condition of hysteria. He dashed his carbine and his plumed chapeau on the ground, in token of the sheer vanity of such baubles, spread his arms, and poured forth a terrible story of the abduction.

Henry went berserk in turn, and fairly flung the distracted soldier from him in his fury. He sprang into the little car and started it, and scorched out of the yard with such a burst of speed that the sergeant barely caught the running board in a reckless jump. The American leaned grimly over the wheel and burned up the rough road like a race driver. In the open country beyond the village he saw the five riders making for the rocky passes in the higher hills, and he got out his pistol. The little mules were at a fast gallop, but he was overhauling them literally by leaps and bounds—the flivver had learned something from the goats of the mountains, and its wheels spurned the road. The mountain men were not dismayed, however, by such pursuit. No sooner did they hear the popping motor and see the car hurtling after them than they swung their mounts to the rocky bank above the highway and gradually forced

them up the steep hillside, where the absence of trails or beaten paths seemed scarcely to bother either riders or steeds.

Henry raced the car to the point where they left the road, then stopped with a grinding of brakes and sprang out. The two rearmost bandits halted and fired their shotguns with murderous intent, and they shattered the windshield of the flivver and popped a tire.

The sergeant was about to open his habitual fusillade, but Henry wrested the carbine from him, flung it to his shoulder, and fired.

One of the riders pitched from his mule, and the others, yelling like wild Indians, used their spurs and went helter-skelter out of sight.

Henry and the soldier ran up to the fallen man and found him little more than disabled with a shot in the leg, and still in condition to call down awful curses on them. While the sergeant confiscated a shotgun and a long knife, Henry mounted the mule and rode alone after the abductors.

The sergeant called after him, beseeching him to wait, but to no avail. The little man was distressed, and he vented his spleen in a kick at the wounded peasant, then ran back to the abandoned motor car. He stared at it helplessly, exasperated that the thing could be so useless without an experienced driver.

A farmer came riding along on muleback, carrying a sack of grain to the mill, and the sergeant brusquely ordered him to dismount, commanded the animal for the military service, and was off at a gallop to summon reinforcements for a mountain campaign against the Scaduto clan.

FAR above the trail the four kidnapers halted on a narrow plateau for council. They saw Henry toiling laboriously from crag to crag, unfamiliar with the art of mule riding,

and they chuckled with grim satisfaction.

Beppe, holding the half-swooning Bianca in front of him, grew sentimental and tried to kiss her, but she struggled with him and slapped his face sharply. He affirmed the superiority of his sex by returning the slap vigorously, to the delight and approbation of his comrades; then he tied her hands together with a scarf, and rejoined the council of the clan.

He and old Orsino conferred darkly, and presently ordered the two young men with them to ride back and meet Henry. The men were neither flattered nor pleased by the assignment, but looked to their guns, turned back, and rode down through the thick brushwood and the rocks.

There was as yet nothing essentially Sicilian in Henry's mental attitude. The romantic errand into the mountains of the historic island, celebrated by Homer and by all the historians of Europe since Plutarch, scarcely stirred the Latin blood in his veins to anything more than a natural desire to rescue his lady love and have done with the whole wretched business. He expected a few heated arguments, and some bursts of buckshot in the Scaduto manner, but he was confident of the outcome, and had visions of giving Beppe another lesson in the American system of self-defense.

As he rode through the thick undergrowth, trying to pick out the trail made by the four mules, buckshot suddenly rattled all about him as a puff of smoke came from a point fifty yards to his right.

He slipped from the saddle, crept to the cover of a huge bowlder with carbine ready, and waited. He raised his hat slightly above the top of the rock, and there was a second shot, some of the slugs clipping the hat's crown.

He bobbed up, then, and fired at the thin cloud of smoke, quickly reloading with a jerk of the lever as he crouched again.

There was a rustling in the bushes back of him. A head and the muzzle of a gun appeared as he turned sharply, and he drew a bead on the head. Quick as thought, the other man, now in his rear, fired again, and some shot, evidently ricocheted, from their lack of force, sank into Henry Baretti's back and shoulders, penetrating the skin.

As he cried out in pain and dropped to his knees the man in front moved forward quickly, and Henry flung up the carbine and fired point-blank, dropping him where he stood.

"I've dressed your friend for his funeral," he called out to the other in good Sicilian idiom. "If you are alone, you'd best look out for yourself!"

To his surprise the fellow took the advice seriously. There was a scrambling in the thicket, and a mule went slipping and stumbling away over the rocks at a fair speed.

Henry felt faint and weak. His back and shoulders burned and ached, and there was a thin trickle of blood from a nick on his scalp. A sense of his predicament flashed over him. He had dashed heedlessly into an affair that was becoming a little too extensive for a man acting alone, and without experience in such bickerings. Palermo was but a short way off, with a police system organized to cope with such business, yet he had been foolhardy and reckless, and Bianca might suffer for his folly.

His native courage reasserted itself, however, and he crawled toward the fallen foe. From the man's relaxed appearance he feared that he was dead, but in a moment the eyes opened and gleamed at him malignantly. The bullet had pierced the right side, and the man was out of commission for active warfare, but he would probably recover.

Henry took the long knife that the bandit wore at his belt, rejecting the clumsy shotgun, then got painfully to

his feet, carbine in one hand, knife in the other.

A CHANGE came upon him—something mysterious, atavistic: he felt vaguely elemental and ferocious. His best beloved was wrested from him by enemies, and it seemed that some ancient warrior blood surged in his veins. Early that morning he had been Henry Higgins Baretto, of New York, alumnus of a great university, business man, and a person of no little importance: now he stood in tattered shirt and trousers, blood-stained, armed with carbine and murderous dirk, and he caught and mounted the straying mule and rode farther into the mountains, grimly intent on his next meeting with the foe.

Approaching a narrow pass between two great rocks, the mule suddenly flapped its ears forward alertly and sent forth a braying challenge, then balked, with its hoofs glued to the ground.

A horse's head came in view, then the rider, leaning forward in the saddle, pointing a long-barreled revolver at Henry, as Henry leveled the carbine at him.

The man was no kin to the Scaduti, it was evident, but it was not easy to place him in any classification. He wore enameled cavalry boots with bright spurs, one of the capacious blue cavalry cloaks of the Italian army, and a wide-brimmed hat of black felt. A black mask covered his face from brow to chin.

For a moment it was a question, which of them blocked the narrow pass for the other. But the suspense was ended by a muffled voice issuing from the mask.

"If it is your desire to live, turn back. In Sicily there is no room for you. For you the drama is ended, the curtain descends."

"M-m—I thought so!" Henry exclaimed, nodding with a certain satisfaction. "But you sing such things

better than you act them, Signor Stettino. The barrel of your revolver is shaking. Is it stage fright?"

"The emotion of a man who loves and hates," the masker proclaimed in melodramatic tones. "I am a desperate man. Life and death mean nothing to me. Be warned!"

"Get out of my way," said Henry. "Signorina Bianca has been carried off by Beppe Scaduto and his gang—if that means anything to you."

"I know it," said the other. "It is why I am here. I shall punish the Scaduto swine for their impudence. But I want no help, no interference, from you."

Suddenly Henry let out a wild yell and drove his heels into the mule's flanks. The beast, rudely startled, jumped forward, then lashed out with its heels.

Stettino's horse snorted and reared, and as the two animals were jammed together in the defile, Henry reversed his carbine and swung the butt at the masked cavalier, catching his extended arm and knocking the revolver from his hand.

The horse sprang forward and crowded the mule against the rock, and as the men came in closer contact, Henry dropped his carbine and flung his arms about Stettino, heaved his bulky form from the saddle, and tumbled him to the ground.

The man grunted as his breath left him, groaned, and rolled on his back, making no effort to prolong the battle.

Henry searched him and took a stiletto from a sheath under his jacket, and a packet of cartridges from a pocket. The heavy cloak was of practical value, and he appropriated it, and reclaimed the revolver.

The mettlesome charger was now contentedly cropping grass, but Henry rejected it, preferring the sure-footed mule for mountain travel.

"You'll have a headache, Stettino," he said, as he mounted, "but you got off easy, I think. Go back to your

villa at Taormina and practice vocal exercises. There's another opera season coming on."

As he rode off he noted that dusk was falling. The mule, picking its own way, found a narrow ribbon of beaten trail where other mules had lately passed, and took it gratefully.

With the excitement over, Henry found his pain returning and his head burning with fever, but he had no thought of halting.

In a narrow clearing were many hoofprints, suggesting that a halt had been made there, and as he looked about, his eye fell upon a wisp of white cloth clinging to a bush. He dismounted and secured the token, a piece of a woman's handkerchief, and vaguely comprehended its significance.

He knew nothing of scouting or tracking, but he decided on the evidence that the party left the trail at that point, for he could see the fresh track of only one animal where the easier trail went on. He forced his unwilling steed up over the rocks, and began to climb hither and thither, trusting to luck and the mule's choice of a path to lead him to a definite trail.

It was determined later that he had been gone from the beaten trail no more than a quarter of an hour when a detachment of Bersaglieri, guided by the little sergeant, came clattering up in single file. A halt was made in the clearing, and there was some discussion of sending out a general reconnaissance, but the lieutenant in command was impatient for action and he gave the signal to resume the march.

CHAPTER V.

HELD FOR RANSOM.

BEPPE and Orsino Scaduto covered a considerable distance during the long twilight. Orsino knew the ground and led the way through a maze of goat trails and rocky passes till they came, near nightfall, to a wooded

glen where a small hut nestled snugly among the trees.

The men tethered their mules, and the exhausted Bianca sank with a groan upon the ground. When they caught her playfully by the arms and tried to lift her, she fought like a young fury, but they carried her willy-nilly into the hut and invited her to sit with them at a makeshift table for refreshment.

Beppe produced a bag of bread, sausages, and onions, offering the simple fare to the captive, but she refused to eat, and they allowed her to lie down on a bench while they regaled themselves and rejoiced over the apparent success of their flight.

Henry found no hut prepared for him in the mountains, but when it was too dark to follow any sort of a trail he picketed the mule by a brook, and made an uncomfortable bivouac with the saddle for a pillow and the cloak for a blanket.

At dawn he was wretchedly ill and faint, but he resumed the pursuit. In the daylight he found and followed a faint trail until noon, but after that the mule was the guide. The young man's eyes blurred and his thinking was confused. He ate some berries that resembled American blueberries, but they made him more ill.

All day he wandered, and in the cooler air of dusk his fever seemed to abate. He rode through a rocky gorge, and came out in a pretty green glade. The mule set up a clamor of jubilation, and was answered in a startling manner by other mules.

Henry gripped his carbine and slid out of the saddle. Peering through the trees he saw a small hut not more than a hundred feet away, and as he took cover behind a large tree, Beppe and Orsino ran out of the hut with their guns and glared about the clearing fearfully.

Rallying all his strength, Henry rested the carbine against the tree trunk, and fiercely ordered the two bandits to drop their guns and put up their hands.

In bewilderment and terror they stared about for the unseen foe, then meekly obeyed the command. Henry then stepped from cover, and warned them that he would fire if one of them moved a finger.

A glad cry sounded from the hut, and Bianca appeared, her face alight with relief and joy.

"It is, then, your turn, Baretto," old Orsino remarked with a suspicious mildness, while his eyes shifted craftily. "What would you have us do?"

"Put down your knives also," said Henry sternly. "Then—get your mules. We shall start at once for— Ribotto. The Signorina Donati will—will—"

He could not think what he had started to say. There was a maddening roar in his ears, and something was hammering his head. Darkness came on with an unnatural rush. He could not see Beppe, or Orsino, or Bianca. The ground rolled and heaved, and he put down the butt of the carbine and leaned upon the barrel to steady himself.

Then strong arms were flung about him—strong, but not gentle arms—and he heard, far off, harsh shouts of laughter and mockery. He was caught up and carried along, and his bearers had no regard for his sore muscles and tortured brain.

ACROSS the Atlantic Ocean, Mrs. Amanda Baretto was sitting with her husband in their spacious drawing-room when the butler handed a cablegram to Giovanni. He raised his brows with casual interest, and Amanda craned her neck to see the paper that he took from the envelope.

Your son Henry H. Baretto lost in mountains near Palermo. Probably held for ransom by notorious Scaduto clan of Ribotto. Police are hastening to relief.

THOMPSON,
U. S. Consul.

Amanda read the message over Giovanni's shoulder and became shrilly

hysterical. Her husband went alternately red and white. He perspired profusely. The muscles of his face and neck were contracted in spasms of nervous reaction.

Presently he issued commands, incoherently, but the servants dashed wildly about the house—the telephone—the master's coat, the master's hat, the master's traveling bags, and what-not.

"What shall we do?" Amanda found strength to ask at last.

"In all the world," said her husband, "there is but one man who knows what to do at this terrible moment. I am that man! First, a five-day ship to Europe. Then—the mountains of Sicily! Ribotto! The Scaduti! Orsino Scaduto! Ah!"

"You know him?" gasped Amanda.

"Know him? It is not only that I know him—it is that he knows me!"

"I shall go with you."

"You cannot go, my angel. This is for men—for a man!"

"You shall not go alone—you are too rash—too brave! You will sacrifice yourself, perhaps for nothing. The cablegram speaks of ransom. I shall go with you and take money with me—a hundred thousand dollars."

"Two hundred thousand!" suggested Giovanni practically, and masterfully.

"Whatever you advise, my dear."

"Two hundred thousand—but not for ransom! I do not pay ransom to goats like the Scaduti. I shall deliver these vagabonds to justice, but we must travel swiftly, and make an appearance in keeping with our station."

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE MOUNTAINEERS' HUT.

WHEN Henry was again conscious of things about him he was lying on a hard couch, sick and in racking pain. His ankles were bound together with rope and the rope

was fastened to the couch. There was a cold, wet cloth on his head, and he surmised that Bianca put it there, for he could see her sitting on a stool a few feet away, regarding him with tender eyes that were red with weeping.

"The American millionaire is awake," Orsino observed dryly. "He wishes for his breakfast. Send for his servants. We humble folk are not worthy to serve an American millionaire."

"What are you going to do?" Henry demanded faintly, but with an air of defiance. "I'm very sick. I may die here if I can't get help. That 'd be a sorry day for you."

"The funeral will be simple," said the jocular Orsino. "We shall do our best to honor your excellency, but there will be no flowers, no candles, no coaches, no black horses with plumes. You should not have come into our mountains for a funeral, Signor Baretto. Your father had the wisdom to go away, that he might live."

The young man groaned in exasperation, and turned his eyes on Bianca.

"You have a bad fever, my dearest," she whispered softly, trying to be calm. "But you will not die—you are too young and strong for that. As for these fellows, they are cowards and dogs. They will not harm you. I—a woman—I made them take the little bullets from your back with the point of a stiletto. I made them afraid that I should send them to prison for life if you died of poison from the bullets."

Henry squirmed uneasily.

"My back feels as if they did it with a plow, but I am grateful to you, Bianca."

"They are cruel and heartless and contemptible," she went on, looking at her captors disdainfully, "but they will not harm us. But for my knowledge of them I should have died of fright. They fear greatly the law and Signor Mussolini. They will seek only to obtain a ransom for you and me."

Orsino ordered her to be silent.

"Cowards? Not cowards, but wise men! We know how and where to keep away from the police; we know how to get the money of the American millionaires. Little Bianca shall get money for us, too: her father and mother will take all they have from the bank at Palermo."

Henry desired only that every one should stop talking. He shut his eyes that he might not see all the objects in the room revolving like a Coney Island merry-go-round.

Orsino insisted, however, on telling the captive of the notice that had been posted in the village of Ribotto. In it the Scaduti demanded thirty thousand *lire* for the release of the little opera singer, and sixty thousand for the young American traveler. A time limit of seven days was set, and it was intimated that if the ransoms were not forthcoming within that period, the friends of the prisoners would never see them again.

"Baretto will be dead," explained Beppe with relish, "if Orsino and I are alive, and you, Bianca, will be Signora Scaduto. We shall live like happy little ducks far away from Ribotto—the south of Sicily, perhaps—perhaps in Sardinia."

"Donati women have never been married to goats!" cried Bianca hotly, and turned her back on the young bandit.

It was very trying for a man with wounds and a fever, and as the days passed it grew steadily worse. Orsino fretted because his lookout at the place appointed for the delivery of the ransom brought no favorable reports, and the vindictive Beppe gloated over his plans which were to mature after the passing of the seven days.

On the sixth day the situation became strained and tense, but in the afternoon came a sudden alarm that took Orsino and Beppe flying to the door with their guns.

Two men were approaching the hut, and Orsino was ready to open fire as

he challenged them. But one of them quickly gave the password and proved to be their own clansman, the young scout and lookout.

"This *signore* is a friend," he announced to the scowling Orsino, "and he would come here to talk business with you. He is Signor Remualdo Stettino, of Taormina."

"BELIEVE me, I have nothing to do with the police," asserted the visitor, "and it is certain that they will never find you. I know these mountains well, yet I could not find you without the aid of this young man. I have made inquiries in the town, and the ransom money you demand has not been produced. The Americans are too slow, and they are wasting time with the police, hoping to save money for themselves. Signorina Donati's family cannot get so much money—you set it too high for them.

"I am not a rich man," he went on suavely, "but I have come to you, Signor Scaduto, to make you a fair and honest proposition. I will pay you twenty thousand *lire* now, in cash, and you will permit me to escort the little Bianca away from here."

He produced a fat wallet and opened it upon a sheaf of crisp bank notes.

Beppe took the floor, his eyes blazing.

"Take his money, Orsino—then do what you will with the fool," he said, "but he does not take Bianca away from here. She is my woman!"

"I demand fair dealing, Scaduto!" cried Stettino, growing alarmed. "I am a Sicilian, and I can appeal to the Mafia."

"Give me the money," said Orsino. "You shall see I am a man of honor."

"If he takes her, it will be when I lie dead on this floor!" Beppe declared, and drew a long dirk from his girdle.

"Come here!" Orsino commanded the young scout. "Watch this Beppe. He caught the madness from the

American. If he interferes with our business, shoot him. You hear me?"

He turned then to Bianca and caught her roughly by the arm, and she fought him, striking him with her small fists.

"Take the jade!" he cried, and flung her into the arms of Stettino.

The quick and agile Beppe leaped like a wildcat at the young scout and wrenched his shotgun from his hands. Old Orsino, scared and furious, hurled a heavy stool at Beppe. It struck him a glancing blow on the side of the head, and he staggered and fell against the cot where Henry lay.

Capricious fate was taking a hand in the proceedings. The sick man flung out his hands and caught the falling shotgun in midair. He sat up with a snap and swung the muzzle of the weapon upon the group before him.

"Hands up, all of you!" he ordered. "I'll blow the head off the first man that moves."

He called Bianca to him, and she quickly undid the rope that bound his ankles. Then he told her to get the other shotgun that stood against the wall, and fetch him the knife that lay on the table.

Hurrying to execute the order, she passed within a yard of the apparently dazed Beppe. With the swiftness of a darting serpent he caught her and held her in front of him as a shield.

"Now shoot!" he yelled triumphantly, and backed toward the wall, reaching for the other gun.

Henry was dismayed, but the crisis brought him strength and determination. He dropped his gun and leaped for the long knife on the table. In the crowded room the guns were worse than useless save for a general slaughter, and Beppe jumped for the knife at the same instant.

Their hands met upon the hilt, and they grappled and fought for it. Henry's stature and weight made up in a measure for his enfeebled condition, and he strove to overpower his opponent before his strength failed.

Orsino howled like a wolf and made for the guns, but Bianca extricated herself from the scrimmage as Beppe was forced to release her, and was the first to reach the gun by the wall.

She stood Orsino off, with the muzzle in his face, and he backed away, threatening her with torture and death.

Henry and Beppe crashed to the floor in their struggle for the knife. They got to their knees, and fell again, and still the knife remained their common property.

BIANCA was fascinated by terror as she watched the struggle which must inevitably tell quickly on Henry's scant strength, and Orsino, watching her, sensed a chance and took it. He threw himself under the barrel of the gun, caught it, and wrenched it from her hands.

He tossed it to the young scout, then clasped the shrieking girl in his arms, slipped a hand to her throat, and choked her.

The young scout dutifully made for the center of the room to aid Beppe. Lowering the muzzle of the gun, he tried to follow the rapid shifting of the frantic men, with the intention of blowing the American out of the contest at a single shot.

Henry was panting, and his drawn, white face betrayed the desperate pass in which he found himself. Beppe got the upper hand and bore him down, his whole weight on him, but failed to win the knife.

"Get him now!" Beppe yelled at the young man. "I have him. Blow the dog's head off!"

The youth moved quickly to obey, but was checked by a sharp command in a booming, resonant voice. The youngster leaped up and stared into the muzzle of a revolver, one of a pair in the hands of a personage who had appeared, as it seemed, out of the air—a dramatic figure from the age of romance, carrying himself with the manner of a commander of men.

Giovanni Baretto roared out threats and sharp commands to the battling men, and Beppe flung the exhausted Henry from him and sprang to his feet. Orsino let Bianca fall, and turned with terror in his eyes to stare at the apparition.

"I am master here," said Giovanni proudly, and shifted the drapery of his cloak with an impatient shrug. "The Bersaglieri failed to trace you to your lair, Orsino, old fox—but Giovan' Baretto knows the dens and burrows of these old mountains, eh? Years have passed, but the mountain man does not forget his mountains. Yield yourselves my prisoners, dogs! We shall search all Italy for dungeons fit for such swine."

"The fiddler of Ribotto has become a great man and a fat one!" muttered Orsino. "It is easy to be master with pistols in your hands, but let us have two knives—you and me—and there'll be a different story to tell."

"Come, let us see," said Giovanni. "Does the goat mean what he says?"

"Pay no attention to him, father!" pleaded the astounded Henry. "He's full of tricks. Let well enough alone."

"But I am a new man, my Enrico!" Giovanni declared blithely. "I am once more of the mountains—rejuvenated, filled with the spirit of adventure. Am I one, then, to refuse him the satisfaction that he craves?"

"It would be insane!" Henry protested. "You are too old to fight."

The words were ill chosen.

"Too old! Too old, did you say, Enrico? Come then, and we shall see."

His cloak was off, and his hat followed it. He thrust his revolvers into Henry's hands, warning him to watch Beppe and the other fellow.

He pounced upon a knife that lay on the floor, and snatched another from the belt of the young scout. He tossed one of them to Orsino with a contemptuous gesture.

Henry pointed one of the revolvers at Orsino.

"Touch that knife and I'll kill you!"

Giovanni sprang in front of the weapon.

"You will obey me here, my son!" he declared stoutly, and Orsino picked up the knife at his command.

"Come, then—on guard!" Giovanni muttered gutturally, and crouched to a position of defense, the dirk thrust forward.

Henry groaned and fixed horrified eyes on his foolhardy sire.

THE two old mountaineers moved upon each other craftily, circled, sidestepped, made sudden feints—moved with the tense caution and grim purpose of veteran gladiators.

Orsino darted in, and the knives clashed and slithered. Henry cried out fearfully, but the combatants parted without drawing blood, and were circling and feinting again.

Through the tense silence that had fallen on the place came a sound like the rustling of trees in the forest.

"What!" gasped Beppe, turning pale.

"Quick now!" pleaded Giovanni, addressing his antagonist as though he were the only friend he had in the room. "Now or never! We shall be interrupted by meddlers."

Orsino was muttering, making noises like an ape, the knife held ready for its chance, but he gave way before Giovanni's determined charge.

There was the clatter of accouterments and the sound of excited voices outside.

Orsino took a desperate chance and leaped. The two came together; then Orsino flung himself free, yelling in great anguish.

"Stabbed!" he bellowed. "Help, Beppe, I'm dying."

Four troopers of the Bersaglieri dashed into the room, led by the little sergeant.

"Stand! Every one of you, in the king's name!"

"I'm stabbed!" reiterated Orsino.

"My honor—the honor of my family, is vindicated," Giovanni announced proudly.

The sergeant caught Orsino in his arms as he staggered toward him, then ripped away the shirt from his breast, and disclosed a thin thread of blood streaking down from the shoulder. He touched the wound, and flung the man away from him in disgust.

"Old hound!" he cried angrily. "You are not even fairly scratched."

"I am satisfied," said Giovanni; "it is as I intended. I could have struck him to the heart, but—my honor is satisfied."

"Seize these dogs!" ordered the sergeant. "Bind them to their mules. We return to Ribotto. I make my compliments to Signor Baretti, of America, who has given us such valuable assistance as a guide. Without him we should not have found this place."

"Bianca!" cried Henry sharply, starting forward with wild eyes. "Bianca! Where is she?"

In the wild excitement of the duel, there had been another feat of magic. The girl had disappeared from the cabin.

"Beppe! He's gone—and Stettino!" Henry shouted.

"After them!" yelled the sergeant.

"Stay here, my son," said Giovanni; "you are too ill to go."

But Henry was the first man out of the hut, and when the others ran after him he had disappeared in the dense forest.

CHAPTER VII.

VENDETTA'S END.

THE swiftness of Henry's pace as he dashed into the forest on leaving the hut bore no natural relation to his physical condition. By all physiological laws he should have been unable to run at even moderate speed, with heart and muscles weak-

ened by fever and days of pain and sickness.

It was scarcely a physical process, but something more nearly akin to spirit that sent him hurtling over the rough ground and through dense timber growth so fast that he disappeared at once from those who tried to follow him.

On running to the door, as he discovered Bianca's absence, Henry heard a single cry of fear and anger, and he followed it. Men dying of wounds on battlefields have risen again to lead a charge; there is some reserve force greater than any known to science which responds to the call of the indomitable will and carries on through a supreme crisis in spite of obstacles apparently insurmountable.

He heard the loud cries of his friends, of the soldiers who ran out to join the pursuit, but he outdistanced them all, while they lost their way and floundered in trackless wilderness. He dashed on without pause, led by a voice no longer heard.

There was stubble underfoot, and treacherous roots and vines, but he spurned them, bounding like a deer through pathless groves of ilex, chestnut, and pine.

In the first hundred yards away from the glen, his pace put him on the track of one of the fugitives. Stettino was running alone, and at great speed for a man of his age and ample girth.

Henry caught him as a greyhound would catch a lumbering bear, and halted to seize him and throw him to his knees.

"Where is she?" he cried. "Speak, while you can!"

The man was white with fear, staring into Henry's awful eyes.

"The Scaduto!" he gurgled, struggling to free himself. "The young Scaduto has her. Let me—let me go. I ran to help her—to stop them. He carries her off. Let me go—after them."

Henry let him go, but was off be-

fore him, running with unflagging spirit and vigor.

Stettino lumbered after him, grumbling and panting, but grimly persistent in the chase.

Fortunately for Henry, ruthlessly burning up his heart and lungs as he was, the race was not a long one. Even the lithe and agile Beppe, stalwart as any shepherd of the mountains, could not keep up the fast pace with Bianca in his arms for any length of time.

Henry sighted them down a cathedral vista of ancient pines, the double silhouette outlined against the sky as they came to a place where there was no turning except backward.

A great crag jutted out over the narrow valley below, with a straight drop of three hundred feet from its head, and on it stood—as fixed and immovable as the mountain itself—one of the ancient Norman watch towers of rock and masonry, built by the conquering northern tribesmen when America was unknown and Britain young, but Sicily as old as the legends of Homer.

Beppe was running, with Bianca hanging limply on his shoulder, but he was tired, and as the watch tower marked the end of his course he faltered and betrayed uncertainty and fear.

As the hunted creature goes as far as it can, even to the frail tip of a tree branch, he frantically mounted the steps of the tower, scrambling to the very top as fast as he could go.

There he dropped his burden, none too gently, and took deep breaths and squared his shoulders, making ready to meet the man who was already climbing the steps.

BEPPE had seized a knife when escaping from the hut, and he held it ready and bared his teeth in a mirthless grin as the pursuer came into view.

He lunged forward and made a thrust with the knife, but Henry, who

was unarmed, leaped straight up from the last step but one, paying no heed to the weapon, and grappled with him.

They fell together with a crash against the low parapet of the tower, and Beppe shrieked out in fear of pitching over the precipice. Furiously they writhed and tumbled, without method, kicking and pounding, fighting for strangle holds.

The knife was flung from Beppe's hand and over the parapet, and he cursed his luck as he tried to fasten his teeth in the other's neck.

Bianca was roused from her swoon by the violence of the combat, and with her dauntless spirit she crept toward the men, seeking a chance to help her lover who had come to help her.

Vainly enough, she clutched with both hands at the wrist of Beppe as he flung up his arm for a blow, and he shook her off; then, as the struggle brought him closer to her, he kicked her viciously, and she fell to the stone floor with a moan.

Inevitably Henry's physical strength gave way to the prolonged strain. Beppe sensed the quick weakening of his adversary, and became craftier, taking heart.

He got his powerful back under Henry's body and exerted all the leverage of his stout muscles. He heaved mightily, and Henry found himself off the floor and perilously close to the top of the parapet.

Beppe heaved again, lurching sideways, but Bianca struggled up and caught Henry's foot, clinging to it, dragging him away from the bank.

Each man realized the crisis, the culmination of the struggle, and Beppe fought harder, less deliberately, in his impatience to end it. He repeated the tactics that had so nearly brought success, and struck at Bianca when she came within his reach.

Henry knew that he was flagging, but still called on the mysterious reserves within him; and all at once he let go his hold in a clinch and flung his

arms about Beppe's thighs, lifted him with a supreme effort, and hurled him outward.

Beppe shrieked and clutched at the smooth rocks of the parapet as his body grazed them, but slipped over and disappeared from view of the two on the tower platform.

The girl swayed and sank to the floor, but supported herself with one arm.

"He's gone!" she whispered, staring at Henry. "He's dead!"

Henry's breath was wheezing in his throat, and all the color drained out of his face. He could not speak. He staggered and put a hand on the parapet to steady himself. The other hand went to his heart, and he threw back his head and strove to get air into his tortured lungs.

Bianca rallied to the moment.

"Don't give up now!" she cried, clasping her arms about him. "We must live! Don't look like that—you'll die if you give up."

A horrible choking sound came from his throat, and he gasped and struggled. She screamed in terror and clasped him closer, as if to hold him and keep him. Then she screamed again and cried out a warning.

A darkly red and savage face had risen to view above the level of the floor, from the steps. Two staring eyes were fixed on the white-faced Henry, and purple lips parted in a gloating grin.

Signor Stettino, of the opera, was nearly apoplectic from running and excitement, but the scene on the tower was evidently as gratifying as it was surprising to him.

A moment of hesitation and suspense, then he came up beside the girl and reached for her hand.

"H E'S done for," Stettino said; "you can see it in his face.

Come away, Bianca. There'll be soldiers here—the forest is full of them. You shall come with me.

There's a path down to the Trapani road, and it's best that no one shall see where we go."

She rose up suddenly and struck him in the face.

He cursed her and caught her wrist, twisting it till she screamed. Then he passed an arm about her and lifted her off her feet, slung her across his shoulder, and started for the steps.

Henry, slumped down on the floor limply, moved again, hunched his shoulders and squirmed, like a fallen boxer coming to his senses as the referee counts him out.

Like the boxer at the last count, he came to life in a flash and got to his feet.

With a startled cry the man dropped Bianca and turned to defend himself.

"She," said Henry, in an awful, cracking voice, "is mine!"

And he took Stettino's throat in his hands and constricted it till the crimson face was purple.

Stettino grasped his assailant's wrists and tugged at them frantically. He kicked and flung himself about like an animal caught in a trap, but suffocation was at work.

He went limp suddenly and hung by the neck from Henry's clutching hands.

Then Henry let him fall, and after balancing himself for an instant on wabbling legs, fell down beside him.

Some men came up the steps and found Bianca there, holding her lover's head in her lap.

"The good Lord be praised that we are here in time!" cried Giovanni Baretti.

"In time for what?" demanded the excited little sergeant of Carabinieri. "I don't know whether we're in time to help this Signor Stettino, by the looks of him. And what—where is that young dog, Beppe?"

With something like intuition he glanced uneasily toward the valley below, and shuddered.

Bianca spoke in a faint whisper to

Giovanni, and a moment later Giovanni told the sergeant what she said.

THE innkeeper of Ribotto was dispensing refreshment to the returned adventurers, to their friends, to the soldiers, and even to the three prisoners that sat at one side of the garden in shackles.

Bianca Donati sat beside Henry and held his hand with the naïve frankness of the Latin, while he smiled fondly, though feebly, at her.

Mrs. Amanda Higgins Baretti sat slightly aloof, at least in mood, while her husband held forth eloquently to the assemblage on the intimate details of his adventures. Amanda had never mastered her consort's native tongue, and she comprehended little of the general talk. There was a familiar word or phrase now and then, but the other words came too thick and fast for her untrained ear.

With head held proudly erect and lips pressed to a firm line, she was a little more Victorian than usual, and felt uncomfortably that her New York friends would regard the function which she was honoring with her presence as a trifle vulgar.

"It is for me," Giovanni was saying for the tenth time, "the end of a feud—a vendetta, which has lasted all through my mature life."

"And what was the cause of this so deadly enmity, *signore*?" the little sergeant inquired politely.

"The cause," Giovanni answered, "was—let me see—the cause was—"

"Some great injury was done, I have no doubt," the sergeant said helpfully.

"Why, now that I search my memory," Giovanni said a little nervously, "I declare I can't think what did cause the original quarrel."

"I was a notary in Palermo when Signor Baretti lived here," said Bianca's father, "but I have lived in Ribotto twenty years, and I never heard the story."

"I have lived here always," spoke up the aged innkeeper, "but I cannot recall the origin or history of the feud."

"Of a certainty, I was a young man of high spirit," Giovanni resumed. "There must have been a quarrel, without doubt, but the circumstances quite escape my memory."

"I can tell about the quarrel if any one wishes to know," spoke up Orsino Scaduto, fretting at his manacles. "It was at a harvest festival. I said that Giovan' Baretto's fiddling was like the braying of asses, and he came to me and bit my ear half off my head. For that I vowed that the insult should be washed out in blood."

Giovanni flushed hotly.

"A peculiar custom of the country—biting the ear," he explained, somewhat taken aback. "I was but twenty, and uncommonly high-spirited."

"What are you talking about?" Amanda inquired a little fretfully. "I understand so little, you know—just a word here and there. Were you saying that some one was bitten by something?"

"Exactly!" her husband exclaimed with affected lightness. "It is of no importance, however; a trifling incident of village life. It is now forgotten."

"I shall never forget it," grumbled Orsino, and caught hold of his left ear by raising both manacled hands.

The sergeant begged to be excused, to start on the march to Palermo with his prisoners: Orsino Scaduto, another member of his clan, and Stettino, the opera singer, who barely survived his choking at the hands of Henry Baretto.

Giovanni, still a trifle uneasy under his wife's curiosity, gallantly devoted his attentions to Amanda.

"Bianca is entrancing, my dear, isn't she? I love her as a daughter already."

"An attractive young woman," Amanda agreed sedately, "though possibly a little impulsive and excitable for a member of the Baretto family."

Henry looked at his father with a flicker of the eyelid; and Giovanni understandingly winked back.

THE END.



Famous Rings

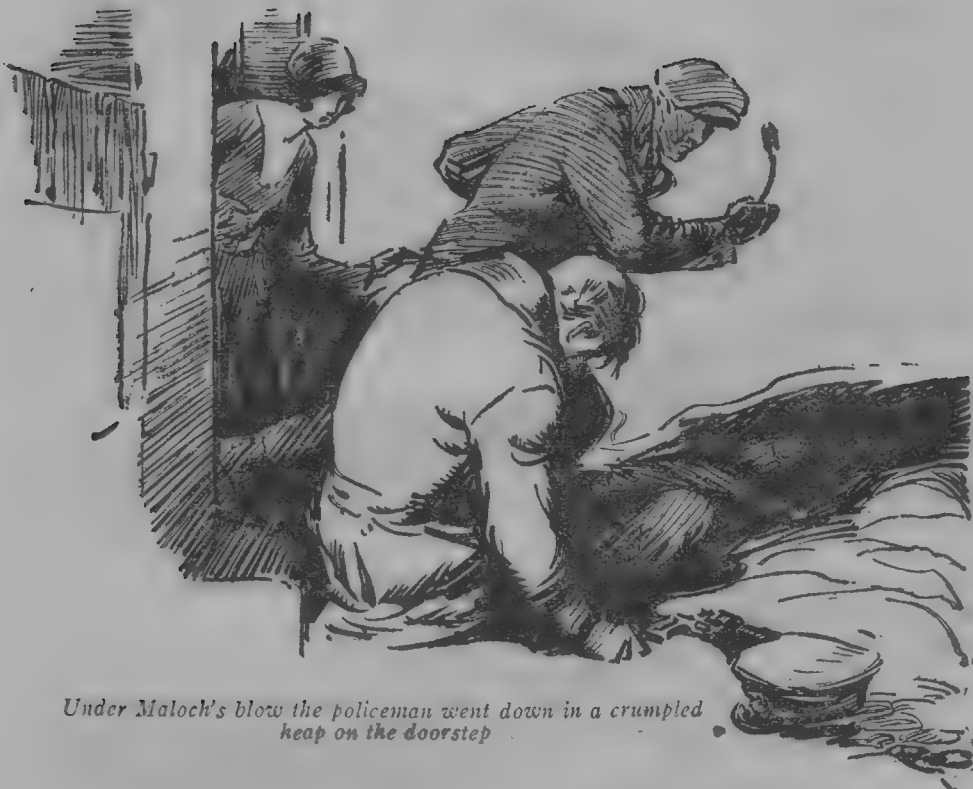
A **SAPPHIRE** ring believed to bring a rapid death to its wearer was placed by its royal owner on the hand of the statue of the Virgin in the public square in Madrid, and so great was the superstition attached to it that not a thief in all Spain would touch it.

The late Czar Nicholas constantly wore a ring in which was embedded a piece of the true cross, formerly one of the treasures of the Vatican. Another noted ring, the celebrated "Luck of Prussia," worn by the German Kaisers and said to be of miraculous origin and marvelous powers, was an Indian carnelian of a purple-blue color flecked with yellow.

A Roman senator so prized his ring that he suffered exile by edict of the dictator in preference to parting with its great emerald, which Marc Antony coveted for Cleopatra.

Mario, the Italian singer, inspired a hopeless infatuation in the heart of a young Frenchwoman, who had one of her pearly teeth extracted, mounted with diamonds in a ring and sent to him; Mario never wore it. Far more gruesome was a ring worn by a Russian noble; it was set with a hollow crystal containing the ashes of his wife's heart.

Minna Irving.



Under Maloch's blow the policeman went down in a crumpled heap on the doorstep

The Big Shot

Was ever a law-abiding girl faced with so terrible a problem as Enid Howard's—her lover on the trail of gangland's leader—and that leader almost certainly her long-lost brother?

By FRANK L. PACKARD

Author of "The Miracle Man," "The Locked Book," etc.

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

ENID HOWARD, who is living on the East Side with a former housekeeper of her family, to gather local color for a book she is writing, has met Phil Martin, a reporter on the *Herald-Star*. In the Gondola Restaurant, on Third Avenue, where they became acquainted, he tells her that from Shive Frank, a gangster he has befriended, he has learned something about the "Big

Shot," the uncrowned ruler of the underworld. Shive Frank is to give him the photograph of the Big Shot, taken a few years before in a group picture at Coney Island.

As she is walking home, Shive Frank runs up beside her and asks her to give Phil Martin the picture, because he is being followed, and doesn't dare to. Indignantly she refuses, but he drops it on the sidewalk and runs,

This story began in the *Argosy-Allstory Weekly* for May 18.

leaving her no choice but to pick it up. A block away a car draws up alongside Shive Frank and riddles him with bullets.

Terrified, she returns home and looks at the photograph. She is certain it is her brother Roy, who had been reported missing in the World War. Locking the snapshot in her trunk, she leaves the house, though it is after midnight, and prowls around the back of Izzy Myers's junk shop, which is, according to Phil Martin's information, one of the gang's hang-outs. There she overhears Myers tell two of his men to hurry to Eightieth Street and Second Avenue to meet the Big Shot; he wants them to raid some loot that Twisty Morgan, a rival mob leader, has just taken in. Enid hurries away, hoping to be first at the rendezvous.

CHAPTER V.

SHOTS IN THE NIGHT.

IZZY MYERS had told the two men to "ride the ozone" uptown. One did not have to be deeply versed in the vernacular to understand what he had meant. Skinny and Maloch were to go up to Eightieth Street on the Elevated.

The nearest Elevated station on the Second Avenue line, equally for them as for herself, was at Sixty-Fifth Street. She reached this, and, by running up the stairs, barely managed to catch an uptown train before it pulled out.

A little breathless from her exertions, she sat down in the first vacant seat nearest the door. She had not been in time, of course, to see who had got on the train besides herself; but she did not think that Skinny and Maloch could have reached Sixty-Fifth Street ahead of her. She glanced quickly now over the occupants of the car—they were not many, and Skinny and Maloch were certainly not among

them. It was possible, naturally, that they might be in one of the other cars, but it was not likely. In any case there was no need to make herself conspicuous by walking through the train to find out. She would know quickly enough when she got to Eightieth Street.

She tried to compose herself, tried to think calmly. It seemed ages ago since she had been followed by Shive Frank; and it seemed as though she had been living from that moment in a world of terrifying and ugly unreality. It was so hard to think—to think rationally. And, besides, subconsciously, she knew that she was almost afraid to think.

In just a few minutes she would see this gang leader and criminal that they called the Big Shot. What would she do if he *were* Roy? What would she do if he were not? The Big Shot, Skinny and Maloch, were about to commit a crime. True, gang war entered into it; true, it was a rival gang that they were planning to rob of ill-gotten gains, of jewels that had already been stolen; but that did not make it any the less a crime—it only added to the total number of thieves.

It had not occurred to her before, that with this foreknowledge of a proposed crime in her possession she was thus faced with a moral responsibility she could not evade; but the realization of this fact came to her now with stunning force.

The train stopped at Seventy-Second Street and went on again. The next stop was Eightieth Street.

If it were Roy, how would she explain her presence there to him? Her hand bag was on her lap; she put her hands to her head as though to adjust her hat—but her hands pressed fiercely against her temples. Oh, she was beginning to think now—to think too clearly. She could not bring Phil Martin into this.

The minutes passed. The train began to slacken speed.

"I don't know," she whispered piteously to herself. "I don't know what I shall do. Just the best I can."

At Eightieth Street she got out. No one else did. Her question was answered. She was a train ahead of Skinny and Maloch.

As the train roared away, leaving her alone on the platform, she stood for an instant hesitant. Was the Big Shot waiting down there at the foot of the stairs, or was she too early—not only ahead of the two men, but ahead of the specified half hour as well?

She walked across the platform to where she could see the length of the stairway leading up from the street. There was no one below there—no one in sight. The neighborhood seemed to be absolutely deserted. No—she was wrong! There *was* some one there—a figure lounging in the shadows near the corner.

She drew back abruptly from the rail of the platform. The figure had come more into the light. It was neither a loungee nor the Big Shot. She caught the glint of metal buttons. It was the patrolman on post.

SHE pursed her lips. At this hour of night the trains did not run very frequently. She would probably have quite a few minutes to wait before the arrival of Skinny and Maloch. She, a girl, at this hour, could not loiter around down there without inviting the officers' attention—and it would be worse still if she were discovered crouching in a doorway in an attempt to keep out of sight!

The only thing to do was to stay up here until Skinny and Maloch arrived, and then follow them down to the street. There was no one here but the man in the ticket office. He probably had not seen her, and was hardly likely to say anything to her in any case; but should he do so, she had only to say that she had mistaken the station and was waiting for the next uptown train.

A sense of eeriness suddenly assailed her. How silent the city had become! How strange and lonely it was up here! There was scarcely a glimmer to be seen in any of the upper windows of the houses and buildings, and the Elevated structure seemed to have blotted out the street lights.

That policeman down there! Instead of trying to avoid him, did he not offer a solution ready to hand for that newly-sensed problem of moral responsibility? But there was Roy! Was she deliberately trying to torture herself? She must first know whether it was Roy or not. If it were Roy, she would plead with him, persuade him not to do this thing. There would be no need then for the police.

A long time passed—it seemed an endless time. And then, as she saw and heard an uptown train approaching, she took up her position as near the exit as she could without standing obtrusively in the light—and waited.

The train stopped. Yes, here were Skinny and Maloch! There was only one other passenger—a woman with a child in her arms.

All three came hurrying toward the exit, the woman close at the heels of the two men. Enid stepped a little farther into the shadows and allowed them to pass by her—and then she began to follow them down the stairs. She was grateful for the woman's presence.

Skinny and Maloch, she was sure, had not noticed her, and now the woman screened her from observation. She did not want to get too close to Skinny and Maloch until they were joined by the Big Shot. The one thing she must not do was to give them an inkling that they were watched—or the rendezvous would probably never be kept at all.

And then, when halfway down the stairs, she saw a man's form appear on the sidewalk—a man who walked rapidly by toward the foot of the

stairs. She caught her breath. She was too high up, and the light was too poor to see his face; and, besides, not only had he passed too quickly, but his hat was pulled down over his eyes—yet she was instantly conscious of an intense sense of familiarity. It seemed to stab at her, to hurt like a sudden knife thrust. That walk, the man's carriage, the swing of arms and shoulders, the poise of his head!

"Roy!" she called out brokenly.

There was no answer—no attention paid to her. The man had gone by. She looked swiftly down the stairs over the shoulders of the woman in front of her. Skinny and Maloch had descended much more quickly than the woman burdened with the child. They were just stepping out on the sidewalk now, and—yes, the third man had joined them. Not one of them had paused. Now they were walking rapidly away in an uptown direction, and she couldn't see them any more.

She was still on the stairway where the angle of the roofing over the stairs hid everything except a few feet of the sidewalk in the direction in which they had gone. She brushed past the woman in front of her, and ran down the remaining steps. And then, gaining the sidewalk, she could see what had been hidden from her before—just a few yards away a car was standing at the curb. The three men were getting into it.

"**R**OY! Roy! Roy!" she called again—but the only answer was the splutter of the car's exhaust as it leaped forward, heading up the avenue.

Mechanically she ran after the car at top speed—and it was not until she was a quarter of the way up the block that, realizing the futility of what she was doing, she came to a halt, and, in an agony of dismay and anxiety, strained her eyes after the car. There was no traffic, and, standing there, she kept it in sight until it swung off the

avenue at the first cross street and disappeared from view.

There was a sob in her throat as she turned then in indecision and looked around her. The woman with the child had gone along Eightieth Street, no doubt. There was no sign of the policeman. The only evidence of life on the avenue was a lighted store window on the opposite side near Eighty-First Street where the car had vanished—an all-night quick lunch, probably.

She swayed a little, and in a curious, groping way felt out for the nearest doorway and leaned against it for support. She wasn't going to faint, was she? She laughed at herself bitterly. She had never done such a thing in her life—but she felt strangely weak, physically weak. She would be all right in a minute, of course. It was just the cumulative effect of everything that had happened to-night, beginning with Shive Frank's murder and—and ending like this—as though fate jeered and laughed at her.

True, she had seen the Big Shot, but was it Roy? She had thought it was. In general appearance he had looked so much like Roy that she had instantly called out to him, called his name. But she had not seen his face. She was not sure.

Tears were in her eyes. Her lips trembled. She did not want to be sure. There was still a chance that it wasn't Roy. If it had been Roy, surely he would at least have turned his head when he heard his name.

He had heard her, he could not have helped but hear when she had called to him from the Elevated steps. Afterward the noise of the car might have drowned out her voice, but he must have heard her the first time, and if it had been Roy he would—

Oh, yes, she knew she was trying to argue herself into the belief that it wasn't Roy, because, if it were Roy, then Roy was—was a criminal. But there was a leaden weight upon her

heart, because she was conscious that deep down in her soul she also felt there was very little room for doubt.

And now, with a crime impending, and whether it were Roy or not, she had missed her chance. The Big Shot was gone. She did not know where Twisty Morgan's mother lived. She only knew from what Izzy Myers and Maloch had said, that it was somewhere in this neighborhood. But she didn't know where. She had no way of picking up the Big Shot's trail again. She had failed, and—

Failed! No, she hadn't failed—not yet! Why was she wasting precious time cowering in this doorway like a whimpering child? Yes—she remembered. She had felt quite ill for a moment. But she wasn't ill any more. There was a great deal she could do to pick up the Big Shot's trail again.

To begin with, there was that store, which she thought was an all-night quick lunch, whose lighted window she had noticed on the opposite side of the avenue. They might be able to tell her in there where Twisty Morgan's mother lived. She would try there first, anyhow.

She stepped out on the pavement, and was about to cross over to the other side of the avenue when she paused abruptly. Up at the end of the block, on the same side of the avenue as herself, three men were just rounding the corner of Eighty-First Street and were coming in her direction.

Her heart suddenly began to beat faster. Three men! There was no one else to be seen on the avenue. Just those three men. They had come from the same corner around which the car had disappeared. They were too far away, and the light was too poor to identify them positively—but identification of any specific nature was unnecessary. She knew intuitively who they were; she knew intuitively what it meant. They were the Big Shot, Skinny and Maloch; the car had been left around the corner for a get-away

—and Twisty Morgan's mother lived here somewhere in this block!

IT had been only an instant since she had first seen them, and now, before she had scarcely realized what was taking place, they seemed to have melted away into the shadows of the buildings up there and she could not see them any more. But her eyes had never left them, and she had marked the spot where they had disappeared—it was almost opposite the lighted window across the avenue. She knew now where Twisty Morgan's mother lived! She had picked up the trail of the Big Shot again, and she would not lose it a second time!

She hurried forward, traversing half the block—and then once more she halted abruptly. From behind one of the pillars of the Elevated, out in the roadway, and about opposite the house where she had seen the three men vanish, a fourth figure came suddenly into sight. She barely stifled a startled cry. For the second time that night she saw the light glinting on metal buttons. The patrolman on post! And he was making straight for the doorway of the house where she was only too sure now the mother of Twisty Morgan lived!

The policeman paid no attention to her. She did not know whether he had noticed her or not—and, with a strange little moan, she told herself it did not matter. Nothing mattered! The patrolman had obviously seen the three men enter the house. His suspicions had been aroused, and he was going over there to investigate. The Big Shot, whoever he was, was trapped.

She was only conscious that she was walking forward again because her feet were dragging heavily. The patrolman was at the doorway there now. She could just make him out. He seemed to be crouching down. And then she saw him running back to the other side of the avenue.

And now, herself almost abreast of the Morgan doorway and the lighted store window across the way, she saw the patrolman dart into the store, and, an instant later, through the window, she saw him at a telephone.

The blood began to pound through her veins in ugly thumps. He was telephoning for assistance, of course. There was not a moment to lose. In another minute he would be back again to stand on guard at the door until his hurry call was answered.

One thought, and one thought only, crystallized itself in her mind. She could not risk the chance that the Big Shot might not be Roy. If it were Roy, it meant prison for him. Prison! Prison for Roy! It was the cry of her heart in crisis, the blood call, overriding, blotting out from her consciousness all question of guilt, all question of her own violation of the moral code. There was only one thing to do, and but a moment in which to do it.

Regardless of whether she herself could be seen by the patrolman or any one else in the store, she rushed forward to the doorway. The door opened under her hand. She entered, and closed the door behind her. Subconsciously she knew that she was groping her way in frantic haste along a hall of some sort that was unlighted except for a glow which showed from an open doorway at the other end; and in a subconscious way she was aware that a woman's voice from somewhere was cursing and raving in a virulent undertone—she had no more concrete an impression of her surroundings than that.

"Roy!" she cried. "Roy! Roy! Quick! Get out of here quick!"

She saw faces appear suddenly in the lighted doorway—masked faces. Then the light went out. She sensed, rather than heard, a swift rush toward her—and then a pair of hands tightened ferociously around her throat.

"Curse you, close your face,"

snarled a voice, "or I'll twist that damned windpipe of yours so's you won't never use it again!"

It was Maloch's voice. She tore at his hands, and managed to loosen them a little.

"It's the police!" she choked out. "Oh, don't you understand—they're here!"

Another voice, obviously that of the Big Shot, from its authoritative tone, spoke sharply:

"Lay off her, and let's hear what she got to say! Go on, sis, what's the dope?"

"THE police!" It seemed as though she could not speak fast enough.

"The patrolman on post saw you come in here. He followed you to the door. Then he ran across the road into that store opposite here, and I saw him at the phone. I'm sure he's back outside there again now himself, and that there'll be a squad of men here in a few minutes."

The Big Shot's voice snapped crisply out of the darkness:

"See if that's right, one of you! Open the door a crack, and see if there's a bull outside!"

Maloch's hands fell away from her. She heard the man moving quickly toward the door.

"Roy," she faltered, "oh, Roy, I—"

"That's what you said when you came in," he interrupted tersely; "but the Roy stuff doesn't mean anything to us. There's no Roy here. You're in the wrong pew, girlie—but it's lucky for us you are, if what you say is right. Now keep quiet! Listen!"

Maloch's voice came along the hall in a hoarse whisper:

"It's the goods, all right. I got a peek at him. He's holding down the doorstep. Hell, this is tough! And that old bag in there just after coughing up enough so's we know that the stuff's hidden somewhere in the cellar—and us now with no time to make her

come through the rest of the way so's we can get it."

"Old bag yerself!" The words came in a screech of fury from the doorway of the room beyond. "No, youse won't get it now! An' I hope to Gawd youse're all pinched. I hope dey burn every one of youse; an' if dey don't, I know who youse are, an' Twisty'll cut the hearts out of youse for dis!"

The Big Shot laughed grimly.

"She's right," he said curtly, "it'll have to stay where it is. That's our hard luck—and hers. If we get out with our skins, it'll be all we take away with us—but I guess the cops will wonder enough about what brought us here to have a squint around for themselves. Go on, get close up to the door, all of you. Our only chance is to rush the cop before the rest of them come. But no lead—give him the butt. That'll be enough."

ENID felt her arm grasped. She was being led toward the door.

The Big Shot's voice, from beside her, came in an undertone now:

"Come along, sis, we'll do our best to save you from getting pinched. It would go hard with you if you were caught, no matter what brought you here. Stick close!"

She did not answer. She was trembling. Not through fear—but through emotions that were soul-deep, at the touch upon her arm. It was Roy—she felt more sure of it than ever.

For an instant there was utter silence, then the Big Shot's whisper came in a grim monosyllable:

"Now!"

The door was flung suddenly open. A form loomed there. She saw Maloch in the lead raise his arm. There was a hoarse, surprised shout from the patrolman, a spurt of flame from his revolver, and then, under Maloch's blow, the man went down in a crumpled heap on the doorstep.

She was running, they were all run-

ning wildly up the avenue. From somewhere she heard the roar of a fast traveling car—then a burst of shots.

They were around the corner now. Yes, as she had surmised, they had left their car parked here. And now they had reached it. She saw Maloch jump for the wheel—and at the same moment, almost before she knew what had happened, the Big Shot had lifted her from the ground, deposited her on the seat of the tonneau, and had leaped in beside her. The car shot forward. She sank breathlessly back on the cushions.

Skinny, from beside Maloch in the front seat, screamed out suddenly:

"Here they come! Step on it! For God's sake, step on it!"

There was another burst of shots. Something hot seemed to sear across the side of her head. It felt as though she had burned herself with curling tongs. Strange! It made her feel dizzy. She swayed against the Big Shot's shoulder.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"N-nothing—Roy," she answered.

"Roy! What t'hell do you mean by this Roy stuff again! You hit, sis?"

But this time she did not answer. Everything was swaying before her eyes. She was dimly conscious that Skinny was leaning out and firing at something, of shots that seemed to sound from everywhere, of the furious speed at which the car was traveling—and then a nothingness.

CHAPTER VI.

THE GIRL BANDIT.

ENID sat up in bed, and looked around her. The sunlight was streaming into the room. Mechanically she raised her hand to her head. Her head was bandaged. There was pain there, but it was not very severe. She was conscious of a sense of weakness. Where was she?

She remembered last night. She remembered being wounded and losing consciousness; and she had a hazy recollection of periods of semiconsciousness during which she had been lifted out of the car and carried somewhere, and of some woman who had put her to bed, dressed her head and given her something to drink.

After that she must have slept for hours—for this wasn't early morning sunlight that was flooding the room. It was more like midday, perhaps later. Yes—she was still wearing her wrist watch—it was nearly three o'clock. And she must have slept restfully, too, for she could think quite clearly now, but this unfamiliar room bothered her.

It was a very nice room, tastefully, even richly furnished. It was certainly not a police cell. Therefore the car must have got away from the police. But what exactly had taken place? Had any one else been wounded besides herself? Some one, perhaps, *killed*?

At the thought of this possibility, she twisted her hands nervously, anxiously together. The Big Shot—Roy—was he safe? The patrolman whom Maloch had struck down on the doorstep—what of him? Skinny? Maloch? The officers who had pursued them in the police car? And who lived in this house? Where was she now?

Her glance fell suddenly on a newspaper that lay on the bedside table. For an instant she stared at it, then she reached out and snatched it up.

"Front page stuff!" Curiously, she seemed to hear Phil Martin saying that again. "Front page stuff!"

The captions that had caught her eye were set in big type at the head of two columns of text:

JEWEL HI-JACKERS ON RAMPAGE

Police Foil Robbery

But Girl Bandit Saves Gang

Enid read on. The "story" detailed the suspicions of Patrolman

Keeney on seeing three men, at two o'clock in the morning, enter the house where lived the mother of Twisty Morgan, a notorious underworld character. Keeney had crossed the street to investigate—and had discovered that a felonious entry had been made into the house.

Enid, tight-lipped, nodded her head. She had wondered a little about what had prompted his subsequent actions. He had found that the door had been unlocked, presumably with a skeleton key which naturally had left no traces, but there had been a chain on the inside of the door supplementing the lock, and this had been cut in two by some instrument introduced through the inch or two of space which, when intact, the chain had permitted the door to be opened. Yes, she quite understood that! That was Skinny's work—with the "door tools" that Izzy Myers had told him to take along.

The next paragraph brought a low, startled ejaculation from her lips. The gang's "lookout" had been a girl—that was all that had saved them. The girl bandit had been posted on watch somewhere outside, so the paper said. Patrolman Keeney had seen her dart into the house to give the alarm while he was across the road telephoning to the station house for assistance in order to guard both the front and rear of the premises before attempting an entry into the house.

The girl bandit! She herself was the "girl bandit!" She was one of the gang—a member of the gang. Yes, in the eyes of the law, that was quite true. She, too, was "wanted!" For a moment she shut her eyes.

THE rest of the newspaper account she read fragmentarily, almost mechanically. Most of the details she already knew. Patrolman Keeney had been knocked senseless on the doorstep, but had not been seriously hurt. There had been a running fight between the bandits' car and the police

car, with no known casualties. The bandits had escaped, due mainly to the fact that a bullet had punctured one of the police car tires.

There was no clew to the bandits' identity. The attempted robbery had been abortive, thanks to the alertness of Patrolman Keeney; but the affair had led to the recovery of all the jewels stolen in the big Maiden Lane break earlier in the evening. It had been a question of gang eat gang—jewel hi-jackers.

The police had returned to Mrs. Morgan's house. Mrs. Morgan had not been communicative. She did not know who had broken into the house, nor what they had come for. She merely raved and swore. The police, however, had other ideas. Twisty Morgan, even if he did not live with his mother, had a record. There must be something there worth having to account for the attempt that had just been made. They had searched the house, found the proceeds of the jewel robbery in the cellar—and were now looking for Twisty Morgan. But up to the time of going to press Twisty Morgan could not be found.

The paper fluttered from her hands to the counterpane. She stared straight in front of her, seeing nothing, striving desperately to think coherently. Who had placed that newspaper so obviously on the bedside table? And why? Was it to impress her with the fact that she was in the same criminal category as any other member of the gang—that she was hunted too? Who lived in this house? The Big Shot—Roy—must have brought her here. What connection was there between him and the occupants of the house?

And where was Roy? Where was any one?

She looked quickly around her now. It was unendurable to lie here like this and torment herself with unanswerable questions. Yes, there it was! A bell-push hung from the head of her bed.

A queer little smile crossed her lips as she rang the bell. Wherever she was, the establishment seemed to lack for nothing in the way of comfort and convenience!

Perhaps a minute passed, and then, answering her summons, there was a knock upon the door, and the door opened.

As she stared at the figure standing there, leaning nonchalantly with his back against the door, which he had closed behind him, she felt the blood drain from her cheeks. She tried to speak, but there was a choking sensation in her throat, and no words would come.

She was sure now that it was Roy. Last night she had not seen his face; she had recognized only what she had thought were certain mannerisms in his walk and carriage; but now she was prepared to swear that she recognized his every feature—that it was the same clean-cut, handsome Roy whom, until last night, she had regarded as dead. How well he looked, how much the perfect gentleman, as he always had looked! Roy—the Big Shot—therefore a criminal. It was incongruous, fantastic! This well-groomed figure a criminal! Her lips trembled. She was snatching at straws again.

It was known to everybody that the successful crooks of to-day knew how to wear their clothes. She put her hand to her throat, to ease its throbbing. There was no responsive recognition in his face. Those dark brown eyes of his, the replica of her own, were regarding her merely in a friendly, speculative way.

"We thought we'd let you sleep as long as you could," he said pleasantly. "It was the best tonic you could have. You had a narrow squeak, but I'm glad to say it was only a scalp wound. You'll be around again all right in two or three days. We didn't call a doctor, because," he smiled as he lifted his shoulders, "well, questions might

he asked, and the police aren't very happy this morning."

SHE found her voice.

"Oh, never mind about my wound!" she cried—and in a surge of love and yearning reached out her arms to him. "Roy! Roy! Roy! Don't you know me, Roy?"

"I'd like to put 'em around my neck," he said with a grin; "but even a crook, which you know I am, sometimes plays the game. I owe you too much to take the embrace under false pretenses! Whatever the mistake was that brought you into the game last night, I'd have been pinched if it hadn't been for you, and, what with a few other things that they'd have been able to stick onto me, I'd have gone up for keeps. I'm for you strong, kid, but I don't know who you are. I never saw you in my life until last night."

She stared at him incredulously.

"There wasn't any mistake last night, and there isn't any now," she said. "I followed you intentionally last night. Didn't you hear me call to you from the Elevated steps?"

"I heard some one call 'Roy,'" he answered; "but it didn't register with me. No one ever called me Roy before, for the very simple reason that it's not my name."

"What is your name, then?" she asked a little numbly.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I've had a lot of them," he said. "Varney, for one—Hal Varney. I used that until it got to have too familiar a sound in certain quarters. My real name is—I guess you can be trusted after last night, and since you're in it now yourself—Kane, Norman Kane, usually known as Norry Kane."

"Your name is Roy Howard," she said in a monotone.

"Nix!" he said. "I've told you—Norry Kane."

She bit at her lips, but the tears

came. She buried her face in her hands and burst suddenly into sobs.

He came quickly across the room, and, sitting on the edge of the bed, put his arm around her shoulders.

"What's wrong, kid?" he asked anxiously. "I don't get you at all."

"Oh, why are you acting this way?" she asked piteously. "Is—is it because you are trying to save me from—from the knowledge that my brother is a criminal, that you are pretending to be some one else—that you are pretending you do not know me, that you have never seen me before?"

He drew back from her, staring at her in amazement.

"Your brother?" he gasped. "Do you mean to say that you think I am your brother?"

"I don't *think* you are at all"—she had steadied her voice again now—"I know! You are Roy, and I am your sister, Enid Howard."

He was silent for an instant, then he laughed a little grimly.

"Well, either I must look a lot like him," he said, "or you've got something up your sleeve that I don't understand. Anyway, it won't take a minute to knock the brother proposition on the head."

He opened the door and called down the hall. She could not make out exactly what he said, but a moment later he had ushered a man and a woman into the room. She looked swiftly, critically from one to the other. They were middle-aged. The woman was a little overdressed. So was the man. He sported a massive gold watch chain, and the large diamond screwed into the lower part of his tie was vulgarly blatant.

It was the Big Shot who spoke:

"This young lady says that my name is Roy Howard, and that I am her brother. Will you answer that?"

"What's the matter with her?" inquired the man gruffly. "Is she nutty, or is she getting delirious with that gouge along her head? Maybe we'd

better risk a doctor after all, and fake up a reason for the accident."

"That is no answer," said the Big Shot quietly.

"I'll answer her!" said the woman sharply. "I'll say you ain't her brother. An' I guess I ought to know—me that bore you!"

"Mr. and Mrs. Kane, my father and mother—Miss Howard." The Big Shot accompanied the introduction with an indulgent smile and a shrug of his shoulders. Then he motioned the couple from the room, and closed the door upon them.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BIG SHOT'S STORY.

ENID watched the Big Shot through blurred eyes as he came back toward the bed. She was stunned, but wholly unconvinced. There was something wrong here—something terribly, unmistakably wrong. It was even worse than that; there was something sinister about the situation. There was no question in her mind but that the Big Shot was Roy.

She felt sure they had lied, those two. She had not missed that sudden, ugly gleam in the woman's hard black eyes; nor the crafty glibness of the man's tongue. But, quite apart from all that, and no matter what they had said, or how they acted, or what they looked like, Roy still remained Roy. She could not understand. How could Roy, whatever his motive, hope or think to deceive her as to his identity? And yet Roy himself was participating in this unnatural masquerade, and playing his part easily, confidently, as though somehow he actually believed in everything he said and did—and expected her to do likewise!

"Well, that's that!" he said coolly. "And now, I guess I'll fade out of the picture for a bit, and let you take a turn at the close ups. Even if you were my sister, which I've proved to

you you're not, how did you happen to run into me last night?"

She fought suddenly, desperately for an instant answer that she might not even appear to hesitate—she could not tell him the truth. That would involve Phil Martin.

"I saw you as I went down the Elevated steps," she said—and was conscious that, though prompt, her answer was lame.

"Sure! Of course!" he agreed a little curtly. "But what were you doing there alone and at that hour? And what's the idea of that pleasant little habit of yours of carrying a rod around with you in your hand bag?"

The question was unexpected.

"Oh, you found that, did you?" she parried mechanically.

"Yeh! And it's still in the hand bag over there in the clothes closet with the rest of your things—only it isn't loaded any more." A half smile flickered across his lips. "Safety first, kiddie—but we didn't pinch anything except the cartridges! You couldn't talk yourself, and we thought we might find out something about you, your address, for instance, in the hand bag. We didn't find out anything, as you probably know; so let's get back to last night. Go on—you know what I asked you!"

How much could she tell? How much could she hold back and still make her story ring true? Somehow it seemed ironically unfair that she should be handicapped by being placed on the defensive.

"I've told you my name, and I've told you who I am," she said earnestly. "Why you are acting as you are, I cannot understand; but you *are* Roy, and so you know that we lived in Winnipeg. Father died only a few months ago, and I came to New York to live with our old nurse, Martha. I am writing a book on East Side life, and I am out at all hours, and go everywhere in search of material. I carry that automatic for self-protection."

"Yeh?" He was staring at her with slightly narrowed eyes. "Just luck, then, that you were on the Elevated steps, eh? Well, maybe I believe you—and maybe not. And you're still hipped for fair on me being brother Roy, aren't you? Where does this Martha you're talking about live?"

She gave him the address without any hesitation whatever.

"And you live there with her?" he demanded.

"Yes," she answered.

"Well," he ejaculated with a short laugh, "you seem to have a link-up with about everything that busted loose last night, don't you?"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

He pointed to the paper lying on the bed beside her.

"Maybe you missed it, the headlines not being as big as ours," he said. "But that little party must have been pulled off pretty near your front door."

SHE had missed it—she had been incapable of seeing anything in the paper when she had looked at it before except those glaring headlines that had proclaimed her a girl bandit. But now these other headlines that he indicated leaped out at her, bringing her a sudden dread that he would ask still more questions which, for Phil Martin's sake, she dared not answer.

Shive Frank! Was he going to ask her if she knew anything about Shive Frank, just because she lived near the corner where the murder had taken place? Automatically she read the headlines again:

WELL-KNOWN GANGSTER SHOT

Murder Car Escapes

Shive Frank Killed on Second Avenue

She made no comment.

"It was as nice a piece of work, and as prettily done as anything that's been pulled for a long time," he observed with a complacent and approv-

ing grin. "Yeh? You bet! All to the good—and it was coming to him, too! It's too bad, though, if you were looking for stuff for your book that you hadn't stayed at home last night—you'd have had a grand stand view of it!"

He had had no ulterior motive, then, in referring to her home being almost on the spot where Shive Frank had been killed! She knew relief on that score, but now she shuddered at his unseemly attitude toward the crime. He appeared to be brutally jubilant over its accomplishment, and pleased at the cowardly efficiency with which it had been perpetrated.

Why? This was Roy in a new and unnatural light. For an instant her heart stood still. Had he had anything to do with it? The motive would be there if he knew anything about the connection between Shive Frank and Phil Martin! Was that why he was glad? The question trembling on her lips found voice:

"You—you seem to think his murder was justified. Was it you—your gang, who killed him?"

He laughed outright in her face.

"Well, you've got a hell of a nerve to ask me that!" he exclaimed. "No, we didn't do it, but I'll tell you this—we had him slated for the spot ourselves, only what's left of the mob that he's been traveling with and that he squealed on beat us to it." The Big Shot's eyes narrowed, and he was snarling now. "Yeh! You bet! Sure, I'm glad—damn him for the snitch he was! I used to know him pretty well—too well. And lately he's been going around too much with a nosey newspaper guy that we've just found out has been detailed by his lousy sheet to dig out a so-called mysterious Big Shot that's operating in New York. That's me! See? There's nothing mysterious about me, except that I know how to keep under cover, but I'm the one he's after. I don't know what Shive Frank spilled, or how much this newspaper bird knows, but

before he gets a chance to start anything we'll show him a few attentions that'll tear the truth out of him; and, if he sounds dangerous, any wreaths that are sent to Shive Frank won't be so faded but that they'll do for him too!"

She raised her hand to the bandage around her head. The motion brought her arm across her eyes—and hid from him the fear and agony that she knew was creeping into them. So he did know! And Phil Martin was in danger!

It seemed as though cold fingers were clutching at her heart. Into her mind there leaped the remembrance of her happiness and light spirits last night when she had first become sure Phil Martin was just what he had said he was, and her doubts of him had been dispelled. And now he was in peril, and there was no more temporizing with her feelings—she knew she cared for him dearly, cared for him with all her heart and soul. But she knew, too, in this same moment, that her love could never know fulfillment now—even if he, too, cared. Blinding, poignant agony of mind was upon her. It was not only that the man here who threatened Phil was her own brother Roy—but that she was the sister of a criminal.

THE Big Shot was pacing up and down the room now, his fists clenched, muttering savagely under his breath. She lowered her arms and stole a glance at him. His face was hard and set, and there was something even tigerish in his expression—it was as though some strange metamorphosis had come over the man from the instant that his passions had been aroused. She did not falter in her belief that he was Roy, but this was not characteristic of the brother she had known. She had never known him to indulge in mad outbursts of passion, or to be mercilessly vindictive—but neither had she ever known be-

fore that he had violent criminal tendencies!

She could have cried out in her torment of mind. There was something wrong, something terribly wrong here! How was it possible, even if Roy were the most superb actor who had ever lived, that he had never once permitted the slightest flicker of recognition to escape him? The Big Shot, her brother! Phil! She loved them both.

What was she to do? What could she do? How much, for Phil's sake, could she find out without arousing suspicion? In what way could she best handle Roy? By meeting him more or less on his own ground? Well, she would try that anyhow.

"And how and when do you propose to do all this?" she inquired.

He turned on her angrily.

"Soon enough!" he snapped. "Sooner than he'll like! What's that got to do with you?"

"I was thinking that it had a great deal to do with you," she retorted. "That you had about enough already to take up your time after last night. According to the papers, that woman told the police she didn't know who had broken into her house, but that isn't what she said when we were there. She said she knew who you were, and that Twisty would cut the heart out of you for it. The paper gives a very good account of who Twisty is, and if he knows who, to use the newspaper phrase, was hi-jacking him, that means you've got a red-hot gang war on your hands. That's what you've got to look out for first, isn't it? That's where your greatest danger lies—right here in this house, perhaps, in retaliation."

He stopped short in his walk.

"Oh, that's it, is it?" he jerked out savagely. "Thinking of your own skin, eh? That you might get caught in a jam here!"

She used the only weapon she had.

"I did not think of my own skin last night, did I?" she inquired coldly.

For an instant he stood rocking on his feet, glaring at her—and then suddenly all the savagery was gone from him.

"No, I'll say you didn't, sis!" he said contritely. "Say, don't hold what I said up against me." He sat down on the edge of the bed and took her hand. "Listen, kid, I'll tell you. I get like that sometimes when I've got it in for somebody. What's a fellow to do—sit still and suck his thumbs and let some guy butt in and put him away up the river to get burned? What you say about Twisty Morgan's got a lot of truth in it. I don't think Twisty's mother knew me, and I'm dead sure Twisty doesn't know anything about this house; but I guess the old woman recognized either Skinny or Maloch and perhaps both of them. Sure, hell's going to break loose—I know that. Twisty's had to duck for cover, but he's got a big gang, and he'll play his hand for all it's worth from off stage. But you leave that to me. And you leave that newspaper gink to me, too. I'll take care of him, all right—he won't write any report about how I looked under the big light sitting on the hot seat up there at Sing Sing! You just forget it! And don't ask any more questions either, because what you don't know won't hurt you, and they won't be answered anyway. Now, get that, kid? I mean it!" His eyes had narrowed a little again. "Understand?"

SHE was heartsick—beaten for the moment. She understood only too well. Her efforts had gained her nothing. He was in deadly earnest. He obviously had not the slightest suspicion that, let alone being acquainted with the man, she knew anything about this "newspaper gink"; and to ask further questions now, after what he had said, would only lead to disaster. There was but one thing left to do—somehow, in some way, and at the same time without betraying Roy, she must

send a warning to Phil Martin. How? She did not know. Under the circumstances it would appear to be attempting almost the impossible. But there must, there would be a way. She would find one, make one.

She forced a quiet smile.

"All right," she said. "But you—are there any more questions you want to ask about me and last night?"

He lighted a cigarette and stared for an instant at the blue spiral curling upward from its tip.

"No," he said. "I guess your story's straight, and I guess you believe you thought I was your brother. As soon as you're able to go out, I'll take you over to your place and give that book you say you're writing the once over as a sort of check-up, and then call it a case of mistaken identity and let it go at that."

Mistaken identity! He had said that, too, as though he meant it—and believed it. She looked at him for a long minute steadily. He wasn't, he couldn't be playing a studied part; he was too spontaneous and natural in all he said and did for that—and yet he was Roy. What did it mean? What could it mean?

"Roy," she said in a low, strained voice, "don't you honestly and truly know me? I am sure I haven't changed so much as all that, but that couldn't be the reason anyway, for you say your name is not Roy and that you never heard it before."

"Aw, say, snap out of it!" he exclaimed with a tolerant grin. "I've told you straight you've got the wrong number. What's the use of going to the mat with the thing again?"

"Because," she answered quickly, "if you really believe what you say, then there is something terribly strange about it all. You are Roy, and my brother. I am certain of it. If for some incredible reason you do not recognize me, then at least you know you had a sister and that you lived in Winnipeg."

"I never had a sister, and I never lived in Winnipeg," he said.

"Where *did* you live, then?"

"In Chicago. I was born there"—he laughed shortly—"on the South Side. My mother and father were crooks—they still are. You've seen 'em. I've been a crook all my life. We've come up in the world a bit—from the slums. I've been a dutiful son, and they're getting the benefit of all the bank roll—see? But we're all crooks just the same as we ever were. Everybody in this house is a crook—even to Runty, who's cook, footman and everything else, because he fractured his arm about a year ago and couldn't make a decent living any more at picking pockets."

"You weren't born in Chicago," she asserted stubbornly. "You were born in Winnipeg, and you lived there all your life until you went to the war. You *did* go to the war, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes, I guess I must have gone to the war, all right," he answered, "because I woke up in a German hospital—but that's all I know about it."

"What do you mean by 'you guess you must have gone'?" she asked quickly. "Don't you know when you went, and how, and where, and, oh, a thousand details about it all?"

"Nix!" he said. "I didn't know anything when I got through. I didn't even know my own name."

She stared at him wide-eyed.

"You had your identification disk."

"According to what they told me, the show I was in didn't leave me with even that much wearing apparel."

"Well, then, when did you begin to remember who you were?"

"I didn't." He shrugged his shoulders.

SHE leaned suddenly toward him. She was beginning to see, beginning to understand now why Roy had never written home. But that he should have become a criminal! Her heart was beating wildly.

"How do you know, then, that you came from Chicago; and how do you know now who you are?"

"Aw, say—listen!" he ejaculated a little pityingly. "I get you—but there's nothing to it. I'll say I'm dumb all right on this memory stuff about everything that happened before I got done in, but that doesn't help you out any. You're way off! I've told you before. You've got the wrong dope."

There was a sudden quiet in her voice.

"Tell me about it—all—everything!" she said.

He dragged ruminatively on his cigarette for a moment—then again he shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, well, sure, if you're so stuck on it!" he grunted. "It won't take long. The Fritzies told me I'd been blown up in an ammunition dump with some other Americans when the Allies were running like mad in that spring retreat of 'eighteen. I was the only one they found who wasn't a corpse, and they made me a prisoner and shoved me in a hospital. After the war they handed me back to the Americans, and I was brought over to New York. I couldn't remember my name or anything, and there was a lot of hot air about making me a hospital case and putting me under observation and all that sort of stuff, but I was as physically fit as ever I'd been in my life, and I did the duck good and plenty on that little idea. I handed myself a name—Hal Varney—and then started out looking for a job."

He paused, flicked the ash with sudden savageness from his cigarette, and gave a bitter laugh.

"I didn't get one! We weren't such almighty heroes after the war as my bunkies had told me we were when we were going over! The streets weren't lined with a throat-busting, Old-Glory-yelling populace handing out ice cream cones—or jobs—to ex-soldiers! I didn't get one. I didn't get anything except a few hours' work

here and there. I went flat. There was a joint down off the Bowery where they sold bad liquor to bums when the bums had any money, and sometimes, if you were a regular customer, they'd hand you a shot for nothing—and there was always some come-on soup twice a day. It was a hell of a hole—and I was one of the bums." He paused again. "D'you like it so far?"

There were tears in her eyes.

"Go on!" she whispered.

"Aw, don't let it get your goat, kid!" he chuckled. "It turned out all right for me. I'd never have known who I was, or made the killing I have to-day, if it hadn't been for that dump. It was owned by a fellow named Izzy Myers—who owned a lot of other queer places, too. It wasn't often he showed himself around there, but one night, the first time I'd ever seen him, he blew in. He spotted me, and came over and called me by my right name. 'Hello, Norry!' he said. 'The last time I was out in Chicago your ma and dad told me you'd been killed in France. Say, this'll be some news for them.'

"I wasn't so well by this time; in fact, what with lack of nourishment, I was damned sick. Izzy took me to his house and I came down with pneumonia. He sent for my father and mother. He'd been an old Chicago crook himself, and he'd known my people and me since I was a kid in the gutters. Well, that's about all. I got the dope on everything. I had a nice little record myself in Chicago with a gang—that's why I had enlisted—to duck my nut because things were getting too hot. A lot of us, I guess, did that. Some of the big New York fellows did. Anyway, when I got better I joined Izzy's crowd, and so did my father and mother. That's ten or eleven years ago now and we're still working together—only I'm the Big Shot now, and Izzy takes his orders from me, and ma and pa are living swell."

She sat tense and motionless there in the bed. Izzy Myers! She saw his scoundrelly figure sitting at that desk in the junk shop. She saw it all—the years of it—the abhorrent, bitter cruelty of it. She was certain now, beyond any doubt, that he was Roy. Amnesia! This was how he had become a criminal—blamelessly! Roy's loss of memory had been exploited to wreck his life, to rob him of his fine, clean manhood, to enslave him in the filth and mire of a criminal career. Izzy Myers! This house of crooks!

"ROY, come closer to me," she said in a broken way—and then, as he obeyed her, she reached out her hands, and, clasping his face between them, made him look into her eyes. "Roy, I know now that you believe all you have told me, but not one word of it is true. It is all false. It is all a piece of vile trickery of which you have been the victim. Roy, you never went over to France with the Americans; I can show you a photograph of yourself in Canadian uniform."

He smiled once more that pitying smile at her.

"The Fritzie's ought to know," he said. "And where were the Canadians and Americans together on the same front?"

"I don't know," she answered. "But I can show you the picture."

"Sure!" he said. "I guess you've got a picture all right; and I guess it must look enough like me so's it would make a swell alibi if I wanted to use it—but it isn't me."

"It is you!" she insisted desperately. "You were reported 'missing.' I—I thought you were dead until I saw you last night. You are Roy Howard—my brother. And—and it's so easily proved. I could bring scores of people from Winnipeg who know you. And there's Martha, our old nurse, living right here in New York, though she's away just now for a little while."

Don't you think she ought to know you? Don't—don't you see how easy it will be to show you that I am right?"

He took her two hands from his face and laid them, as though by way of finality, on her lap.

"Hell, kid," he said, "I've had a dozen guys from Chicago that I used to pal with there before the war come up to me here on the street in New York and do the identity stunt you're talking about." He got up from the edge of the bed, where he had been sitting, and walked toward the door. "Forget it! Wipe it off the slate! You couldn't have been more than a kid of twelve or thirteen anyhow when you last saw your brother. It's a sure-fire case of mistaken identity. I've told you so before. Let it go at that!"

The tears were welling back into her eyes. She held out her arms toward him imploringly.

"Oh, Roy, listen to me!" she pleaded wildly. "Listen to me! I was old enough to remember. Do you think I could ever forget you? You are Roy Howard, and that man and woman here are no more your father and mother than I am. That man Izzy Myers lied to you. They've all lied to you. Don't you see? Oh, don't you see? They exploited you. Izzy Myers turned you into a criminal for his own ends by making you believe you'd always been one. They've done the vilest, blackest thing to you that was ever done to a human being!"

He came suddenly halfway back across the room.

"Say, cut that out!" he advised gruffly. "And use a little common sense. What would Izzy Myers expect to get out of me ten years ago by turning me into a crook? A hell of a fat lot—not! I was just a bum—a down-and-outer."

"I don't know," she said. "But I know it's true. And what I've told you about that man and woman is true, too."

He stood for an instant surveying her with screwed-up eyes.

"Well, if you want to keep on thinking so, go to it!" he flung out. "But don't pull anything like that on them, or they'll raise hell with you, and I'm not always at home! I've told you they aren't nice people and that this is a house of crooks. Understand? You're a good kid, and I guess you're straight, and I certainly owe you something for last night, so I'm telling you this for your own good. If you don't go around asking for trouble, you'll be well treated here, and you can have the run of the house until you're well enough to go away; but if you start anything—I'm telling you!—look out for yourself." He stepped back to the door, and opened it. "See you later!" he said, closing the door.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT DEAD OF NIGHT.

ALUXURIOUSLY furnished room with a private bath, in a house of crooks! Enid smiled wanly to herself, as she rose from the bed and, in the darkness, hastily and silently began to don her clothes. The room seemed curiously to epitomize the long afternoon hours of mental turmoil and torment through which she had just passed; it seemed to stand for so much, to point so far, to typify the age; in these modern days outlawry and banditry were well and comfortably, perhaps even impreguably, entrenched in New York!

But in an intimate, personal way this room went far beyond all that—it frightened her. It frightened her because it was the material evidence of Roy's illicit prosperity, because it was something of which he was proud, something that he ranked as an achievement, something that he looked upon as success—something that, in her heart and soul, she now knew he would not readily forego.

She had tried to face the problem squarely, to view it from all angles; but she had not been able to see the end. Roy was as positive that he was not Roy as she was certain that he was. A strange and bitter impasse! This cowardly thing that they had done to him, this cruel, irreparable wrong! She did not know whether, by medical aid, there would be any way of restoring his memory to him.

She could not see into the future, her travail of mind through the hours had been of no avail in that respect; but the hours had not been wholly fruitless. She had seen the road just a little way ahead.

Whatever the ultimate outcome might be, and whether Roy might ever regain his mental health or not, she would strive her utmost to wean him from his life of crime, and meanwhile, to the best of her ability, prevent and stand between him and the commission of any projected felonious act.

Her face was very grave and she troubled now as she hurried on with her dressing. Yes, she knew well enough what she was attempting—perhaps it was the impossible. The only way she could hope to prevent a crime was to have preknowledge of the fact that it was to be committed; and the only way she could obtain that preknowledge was by keeping in contact with, and winning the confidence of, Roy and those around him—yes, even to that false Mr. and Mrs. Kane, for instance! Duplicity! She must become a pastmistress in the art of duplicity if she were to have success.

Well, she had made a beginning! She was practicing that art now. They all thought that her wound was serious enough to keep her confined to her bed. They all thought that, early as it was—not much after nine o'clock—she had settled down for the night, for when Roy had put his head inside the door a little while ago to ask how she was and to say that he was going out,

she had told him she was feeling more comfortable and believed she could sleep through the night if she were left undisturbed!

BUT she, too, was going out! All through that afternoon, mingling with her thoughts of Roy, had been her thoughts of Phil Martin—those two who meant most to her in all the world, yet who, adding to her fear and anxiety, were seeking, from such different motives, each other's destruction. That warning which she had told herself must reach Phil had scarcely been out of her mind. That was where she was going now.

At the time she had not known how she could, had not seen any way by which this could be done—she had known only that somehow, and at all costs, she must get word to him. But she believed now that it was not to prove so difficult after all, and that it could even be accomplished with almost perfect safety.

She had realized that she could neither trust nor bribe any one in the house to help her, that she must depend wholly upon herself, and that to lie there in bed was to accept defeat from the outset. And so, when Roy had left the room that afternoon, she had got out of bed.

She had been a little dizzy, and somewhat unsteady on her feet at first, but she had been relieved to find that she was not nearly so weak as she had expected.

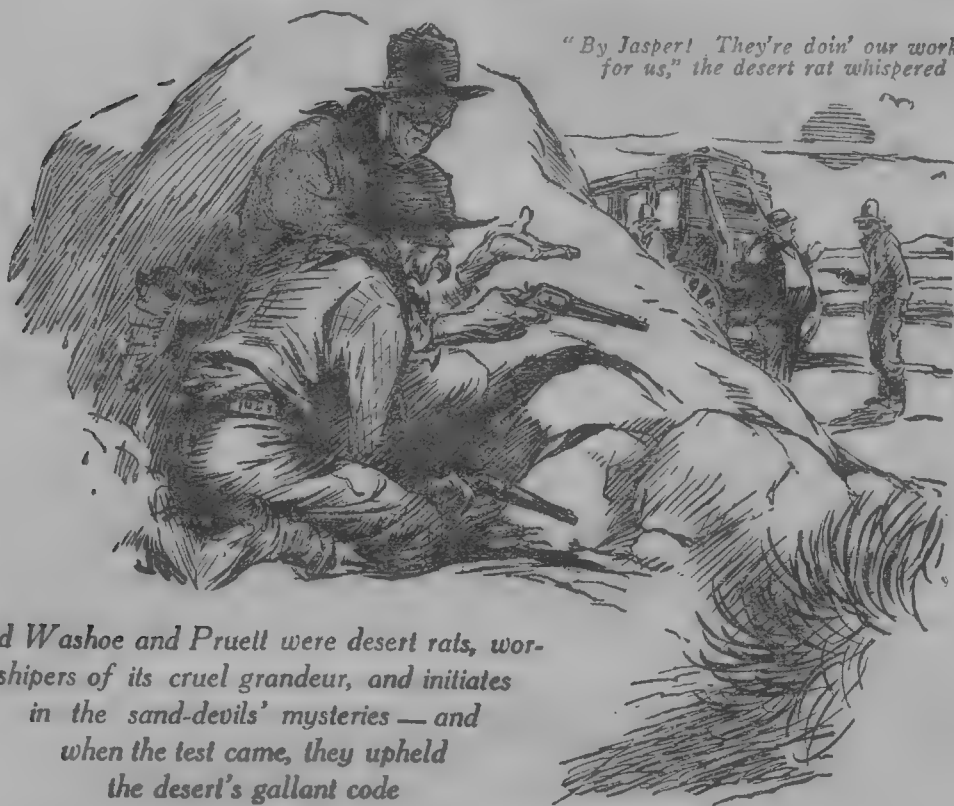
Somehow, though she could not have told why, she had imagined her room was on an upper story, whereas it was on the ground floor and only a few feet from the ground itself; also, it was at the rear and opened on a back yard which was inclosed with a high fence—but there was a gate in the fence, and the gate had even been partially open, giving her a glimpse of a lane beyond. It was the way out, she had told herself—when it got dark.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.

Agents of Progress

By ROBERT J. PEARSALL

"By Jasper! They're doin' our work for us," the desert rat whispered



Old Washoe and Pruett were desert rats, worshippers of its cruel grandeur, and initiates in the sand-devils' mysteries — and when the test came, they upheld the desert's gallant code

Sea, plain and mountain; yea, life and death besides—

I am all things to those that love me.

—Song of the Desert.

THIS is a double-barreled story. There was Neal Travis bossing the job at the top of Bottleneck Gap; there was old Washoe, desert rat, in the sweltering jail on the edge of the town toward the desert. Each had his trouble and each had his dream; and dreams and troubles alike were born of the desert, where the whirling dust-devils danced in the hot wind, to the mad vibrations of the sun-tortured air.

The men were as unlike as life could

make, and their dreams were as unlike as the men. Travis, the developer, dreamed of granaries and gardens replacing all that desert. His trouble was that he had followed that dream to the edge of ruin. Ten miles back from Bottleneck he sat with his assistant, Jackson, in their office halfway up the side of a mighty gap between two treeless mountains. The army of workmen had quit for the day. The supply trains had stopped. Below lay a half-completed dam, behind which Travis had visioned a lapping lake, from which a thousand streams would flow across the thirsty land to the south.

"Money! We've got to have it,"

Travis rasped. "And we've got just this one chance." He tapped a telegram on his desk. "Forty thousand dollars by day after to-morrow noon, or the desert stays the desert."

"But I don't quite understand that," said Jackson. "I savvy how it 'll break you—yes. But not how the work will be stopped. If Horgan takes it over, won't he carry on?"

"Listen! Horgan's a grafter. He never finished anything but his victims. He'll sell the land just as I planned to sell it. He'll even use my name to do it. He's got the prospectuses out right now. The work 'll lag, but go on slowly till the land's sold—then, blooey! He's made many a killing, but this 'll be his biggest."

"And you say he's bought in all your paper?" Jackson was getting complete information for the first time. "Then, even if you can raise the forty thousand, can't he foreclose on the rest of the notes as they come due?"

"When they do, I can raise money to meet them. Could raise it now, if Horgan hadn't been busy with the banks. 'Biggest operator in the world,' he advertises, and I guess he is. He's got a long reach, anyway—from San Francisco to New Mexico."

"But he'll be here in person to foreclose?"

"He's here now, in fact, down in Bottleneck. Came in on last night's stage. Oh, he won't overlook any little detail."

Jackson's eyes shifted to the yellow paper under his chief's hand. "And he's coming in to-morrow night. Your only hope, eh? What sort of person is he? Did you say he was your uncle?"

"Yes, my uncle. Crotchety. Whimsical. Fat and hot-tempered. Suspicious of people putting things over on him. I'm giving you the low-down so you will know why I don't even go to San Andreas to meet him. He'd think I was trying to influence his decision. Hm-m!" Neal Travis laughed mirth-

lessly. "Let Horgan try that. I only wish he would."

"Then, if your uncle won't put up the money, Horgan grabs off the loot. Maybe he will try to influence him. Maybe he will."

Indeed, in his room down in Bottleneck, Horgan at that moment was considering a certain action. He, too, had his dreams, the dreams of a shark, and he had a shark's means of attaining them.

FARTHER down the slope, in his room of barred sunlight, old Washoe stared out at his desert—permanent, unchanging. A minute before, it had mocked him; a spectral gallows had floated high in the mirage-haunted air. But he loved it, nevertheless, had been thirty years learning to love it; and his rheumy eyes softened as they traveled over the treeless, waterless, manless waste stretching over the horizon.

"By Jasper!" he muttered. "The damn 'agents of progress' can hang me, maybe. But they can't change you."

That was Washoe's dream—the permanence of the desert in a world which had changed too fast for desert rats to keep up with. The exact opposite to Neal Travis's dream. For him the desert was God's miracle, and the only place where God still lived. It was Washoe's home and the only place where he was safe. Look what had happened when he had emerged for a day to buy supplies. Self-defense was murder out here; weights and measures were crooked; everything was confusion, and only in the desert was there peace. His old body trembled to be out in it; he yearned for it like a lover; and like a true lover, he consoled himself that it, at least, was safe.

"No, they can't change you. They'll never get past here. Fat men! Ugh! With chuckle-headed laws. Bottleneck is the last stop for them."

A key grated in the door behind him. Washoe didn't turn, for he knew it was the jailer with his evening meal—another ignoble fat man whom the desert would consume in a day. But after he was gone Washoe turned to his meal with appetite but distinct disrelish. Soft white bread and soft warm stew and soup—Lord, *soup!* Luke-warm coffee disgustingly sweet with sugar and weak with cream. Leaving the half-emptied dishes, he turned for another look at the distant sierras which the setting sun was touching with pink and heliotrope, powdered here and there with gold.

His old but far-seeing eyes glowed deep within.

"No, sir! They can't change that."

He started at the sound of a wild whoop from the direction of the town. His deep-wrinkled face relaxed with a welcoming look. No fat man's yell was that, or agent of progress's either. Nor did the raucous song which followed the whoop sound anything else than reminiscently sweet to old Washoe's ears:

"Let sixteen gamblers carry my coffin,
Let sixteen desert rats sing me a
song;

Take me to the graveyard an' lay the
sod o'er me,

For I'm a poor miner an' know I
done wrong."

There was much more of it, but by this time Washoe had reached the door.

In the midst of a deputation of half a dozen citizens advancing from the town was a limp but noisy figure which much resembled Washoe himself. This man was a bit more ragged and a little less to look at, for Washoe had the impressiveness of six feet two, while the newcomer was a mere five feet four. Washoe kept clean shaved, while the newcomer wore a mustache of dirty yellow, and his network of wrinkles was deeper and extended farther up his arms and down his neck. But he was as desert-lean as Washoe and as

alien to progress, with his deep-burned skin, his pale-blue eyes, and his general look of wildness.

As he neared the jail, reeling along mostly under his own power, his song changed to piquant abuse of his escort, and that in turn to a very jerky song in praise of some one who—

"Never said a word, never even
looked—

You would have thought he was
dumb an' blind.

Nothin' could surprise him, nothin' tan-
talize him,

My ol' pard sure had presence of
mind."

Evidently Washoe got some message from that. Recognition faded from his eyes, and he drew surlily back from the jail door. The cell was opened and the newcomer was deposited therein with some unnecessary roughness. He reeled to the nearest corner, sat down on the floor, and continued to sing until the delegation of citizens was nearly back to Bottle-neck's main street. Then he let the song die away in a fashion indicative of approaching slumber, but, instead of sleeping, looked up and winked soberly at Washoe.

"**F**OOLED 'em that time, didn't I?"
he announced.

"What's the general idea, Dan Pruett?" queried Washoe.

"Well, for one thing, I just happened to hear that you an' the gallows was both goin' to get yer dues, simultaneous."

"Maybe so, but how about cruel an' unusual punishment beforehand?"

"Meanin' what, you ol' reprobate?"

"Bein' locked up with you."

"Well, that's easy fixed." Thrusting his hand under the belt of his trousers, Pruett pulled out the front of his shirt, to which was attached with threads a short iron bar with a sharp point and a heavy file.

"If I ain't welcome in here, I've got the wherewithal to leave. Course, you

may insist on forcin' yer further company on me, but I can't help that."

Washoe looked from the tools to the window, squinting his eyes a little to hide the moisture in them.

"I'm sure hatin' to owe my life to a runt like you," he said slowly, "but I can say in gratitude that I was worryin' a little. That shootin' was square enough, as you know, but these here hellions of progress don't seem to allow for no shootin'. They—"

"They'll hang you if you stay here, all right," said Pruett soberly. "That 'Slippy' McGee that you punctured was pet gunman for the rulin' politicians. That old feud over the mine he salted wouldn't matter to them, nor yer friendly agreement to start shootin' on sight, nor the fact that he drew first. But if 'twas just that I wanted to help you out, I might 've shoved them tools through the door. There's something else besides. Look here."

Pruett shoved the bar and file under a mattress and, again pretending drunkenness, leaned on his friend and drew him to the window.

Enthralled, the two old desert rats looked out upon the miracle of sunset, the coming of coolness to the desert, the flaming mountains to the west, and the shades of duns and purples and pinks reaching out over the land they loved. The land that furnished them their livelihood, too, and the only one they knew of; the land where they could always find gold quartz at least worth the gathering.

Washoe's eyes still glowed, but uneasiness had entered them. "It's God's country, Pruett, an' all I ask is to be out there with my burro an' six-gun an' some bacon an' some flour. But what's that got to do with yer breakin' in here?"

"Progress has got to do with it. Did you ever hear of Neal Travis?"

"Progress!" Washoe shivered. "No, I never did."

"Well," said Pruett, "I didn't myself till last week. A prospector told

me out in the hills, an' I came in to investigate. He's buildin' a dam back in Bottleneck Gap to store up the flood waters. Goin' to send a thousand little rivers through there all the year around. Goin' to put farms out there. An' fact'ries, likely. An' towns, like Bottleneck. Lovely little farms an' fact'ries an' towns. An' laws, too, like what socked us in jail. An' the sun 'll get misty an' the light 'll get dim, an— What you swearin' for, Washoe?"

"Gosh ding it! I was afraid of that. I had a dream about it last night. But I kept tellin' myself it couldn't be, with no rivers runnin' through. Flood waters, eh? Howsoever, what are we to do?"

"Stop it," said Pruett.

"Stop it? But we—" Washoe gestured their insignificance.

"You can stop the clock of progress with a cactus blossom as well as you can with a mallet. Provided you know where to put the blossom. An' that's what I found out not three hours ago. Listen here."

They withdrew from the window and put their heads together, and the subject of their talk was the telegram whose three words alone enabled Neal Travis to hold together the fragments of his dream.

"'Comin' to investigate,'" said Pruett. "That's all it said. The telegraph operator was tellin' a feller about it in the Red Paint Saloon. A city fat man, named Horgan. I don't know who it's from, except it's a relative of Travis. An' that Travis is dependin' on him to save the hull thing from goin' to pot. Well, if he don't get here—"

"If he don't get here—" breathed Washoe.

"Got to come in on to-morrow night's stage, by the date on the telegram. Comin' over from San Andreas. Couldn't get here any sooner—not from Chicago. An' if he came any later, 'twouldn't be any use. Well, let's

see he don't get here. It's to save the desert."

"Yes, it's to save that." Washoe had approached the window again, and was lookin' out upon the glory of the desert night.

"BLACK KNOLLS is the only place," said Pruett.

"Yes," agreed Washoe. "It's the only place we wouldn't be seen."

"The stage road's a bee line in from San Andreas. Level all the way, an' in the starlight we couldn't very well hide anywhere else."

"Starlight!" murmured Washoe. "Come water, an' that 'll go, too."

Getting out of jail with the implements provided had given the two men little trouble, nor had the business of recovering Washoe's burro from the field in which it was pastured. Pruett had his own burro and provisions and two guns, and morning found them happily preparing a desert breakfast over a fire of dry mesquite.

The animals grazed near by in a ravine. Above them the sun lanced the heavens with streamers of red and gold far-flung from the eastern rim of the valley. Around them stretched a painted panorama of red plains slashed through with alkali white, and purpling ravines, and in the distance shoulders of receding mountains that joined the earth and sky like clouds touched with the dissolving colors of the dawn.

Treeless, manless, lifeless even. To most people it would have been terrible, but the two old men stared around thrilled with that ecstasy of beauty that exists only on the margin of dread. They scoured their dishes with sand; they repacked their burros; they started out to spend this day as they had spent thousands of others, drifting in perfect freedom over the floor of their desert home.

No hurry at all—no hurry to get to Black Knolls. But the desert would have hurried any one else. The sun

rose higher and higher, becoming a flaming challenge. Barbs of cactus thrust out at them, bitterly vindictive. Ominous rustlings sounded from the mesquite brush, and three carrion birds swung low above it—following, always following. The hot wind whispered of nothing but death, and white bones scattered here and there gave point to the whisper.

The heat wrung sweat even from the desert men, and they had to drink often. Whirling dust-devils advanced upon them like a troop of enemies. Their clothes were white, their mouths were caked, their nostrils were filled with sand. Twice they steered toward remembered springs of brackish but life-giving water, where their canteens were refilled and the burros drank.

Now and then they let their beasts rest to explore parched arroyos, or to break off fragments from the black rocks in search of gold-bearing quartz. They had done these things so long and so often that it would be uncomfortable not to do them. And they suffered little other discomfort, either from the sun or the air or the sand. What they suffered was more than offset by their feeling of oneness with the desert—the free loneliness of the far spaces, the endless rolling vista of sand, merging into the distant horizon quivering and dancing in the light.

Always they advanced toward the Black Knolls. Once, when the threat of the sun was at its worst and they were walking in an alkali cloud, Washoe laughed almost silently between nearly toothless gums.

"S'pose he'll be a fat man, too—this damn agent of progress. How long would it take him to mummify out here?"

"How long will it take him to stagger in from Pegleg's shack?" asked Pruett.

And both men laughed again. The mercy that the fat men would show to their desert, they would show to the fat men. Only not quite—not

quite! No men have lived thirty years in the desert without having felt its fangs. Both Washoe and Pruett had known its bitterest torments, the mockery of its lying mirages, the furnace of drought that one's body becomes when one's throat is closed with thirst. Both had known the desert madness that causes one to travel in endless circles. If they had not, they would not now know its beauty, for the desert is a terrible mistress that tortures before revealing her charms.

"Pegleg's shack isn't far," said Washoe. "Not so far from San Andreas. We'll leave him plenty of water, an' he'll get in all right."

They left the district of sand and rocks and crossed a stretch known as *blanca*—salt, gypsum, and ash of old volcano. Fine as flour the mixture was; their feet settled in it, and it rose in little clouds around them.

Washoe chuckled as they passed through it.

"No farms here, anyway."

"No. But the salt an' the gypsum—they'd find a use for 'em, no fear."

The Black Knolls were plainly visible now—a mile-long tangle of huge outcroppings running north and south. The sun was settling and the wind had died, but the light sand still rose in whirls behind them and filled in their tracks. The burros lagged, but the men were eager, and something of the desert's implacable spirit had entered their faces.

From time to time they spoke of ancient wrongs that towns had done them; of cheating scales and lying merchants, wrongful imprisonments, and mine titles lifted by the jugglery of law. Progress! Progress! Agents of progress! And then they spoke of their desert, lovely and terrible, that they would save.

The desert in which was "nothing, and everything." The desert in which God lived, man being not.

The day died at last in a flood of color, a glorious burst that overran the

sky. The stars came out, close and clear, and in a delicious coolness they passed through the blue-black radiance of the desert night.

As they went they fashioned masks from pieces of their shirts. They would leave their burros at the end of the Knolls, and creep to the stage road on their stomachs, so as to leave no tracks.

THE two crouched behind one of the granite boulders at the western end of the pass through the Knolls. Their revolvers were out and ready; their eyes were squinting down the pass; and in their ears were the pounding of horses' hoofs, the jingle of harness, and the harsh rasp of wheels against the rocky roadbed. Then in a minute they were looking across leveled sights at the lumbering Concord stage, with the driver solitary on the box, slouching forward from the hips.

They had made their plans. Old Washoe was to order "Hands up!" He was to handle the driver; Pruett the passengers, if there were more than one. They figured it would not be hard to select the one they were after: The rest would go on, but he would stay with them, to wind up in Bottleneck in a day or so, considerably richer in desert knowledge but otherwise unharmed.

"Hands up!" old Washoe was to say. The words were forming on his lips. He expected no resistance, but the bead of his revolver had come to rest upon the breast of the driver's dust-whitened shirt.

"Hands up!"

Some one had taken the words from him. Some one across the pass, directly opposite the stage and not fifty yards from Washoe and Pruett. In the same instant two revolvers spoke. Neither belonged to the desert rats. The off leader of the six-broncho team plunged high and sprawled down in the harness, quivering, dead.

"Great gravy!" whispered Washoe. "It's a reg'lar holdup."

The driver began cursing monotonously in a steady stream. He could not put his hands up for the plunging of the five stalled bronchos. The stage threatened to upset. A tall masked man stepped from the bowlders, covering the driver. Two others emerged at the same moment just back of the stage.

"No nonsense, now, or we'll riddle the whole outfit."

The words were clipped, quick, citified and deadly. The driver's low, half-drawling oaths were eclipsed by other curses from within the stage, high-pitched and choleric. These increased in vigor as one of the three men thrust his revolver into the opening and barked: "Cuss all you want to, but come out of there."

The man inside obeyed both directions with startling energy. No one else followed; he was the only passenger.

He was big in every dimension but length—a man of enormous girth and seemingly of volcanic passion. He shook his fist at the two men and sputtered out abuse.

"Horgan's behind this, I bet. Damn thievin' rascal! Just for this, I'll wreck him if it takes a million. What my nephew sees in this blasted country! But now I'll back him, if it takes my last dollar, to beat Horgan. Hirin' holdups! Damn low-down Frisco thieves!"

The bronchos were quieted now. The driver was on the ground, guarded by the third highwayman. Pruett and Washoe, lying tense behind their bowlder, nudged each other with at least partial understanding.

"By Jasper! They're doin' our work for us," Washoe whispered thinly. "They're kidnarin' the man we come to get."

"Horgan thinks," the fat man raved, "if he keeps me away till to-morrow afternoon he can make his grab. And you cowardly swine—"

"Shut up!" rasped one of the men sharply, with a sudden nasty movement of his revolver. "You'll be lucky if you get anywhere in a week from to-morrow afternoon. Depends on how—"

"Now, never mind that!" warned his companion.

"Aw, the devil! Give the brute something to think about besides his money. As I was going to say, it depends on how quick you can walk in from Baldhead Mountain."

"What the devil did you have to spill that for?" asked the other hold-up man disgustedly. "Well, never mind. Get that dead horse cut away ahead there, driver, and get this stage moving."

The driver started to obey, still covered by the revolver. The passenger, as if stricken by some sudden terrible dread, let his clenched, pudgy hands fall limply by his side, his fingers extended. He tried to speak still violently, but his voice faltered.

"Baldhead Mountain? Walk? You mean—"

The highwayman laughed.

"Now, *you* squirm a little. You've studied the map, I see. Thinking over where your lousy money would go. Well, Horgan's against violence, so—you'll ride in and walk out. Ready to start, ahead there?"

"Just about," came the reply.

"By gravy!" whispered Washoe. "Ag'in' vi'lence! An' sets him walkin' back from Baldhead!"

"That fat man! Fat!" Pruett breathed in diminuendo.

BEFORE each of the desert rats rose a picture of Baldhead, fifty miles to the south, and of the trackless plain around it. True desert, that, where even cactus died and mesquite was not; a gray and dreadful immensity where the spring freshets never reached, where there were no water holes, where the sand was powder, the nights were almost as ter-

rible as the day, and which even the vultures avoided because nothing moved but the dust-devils.

Nothing moved, because nothing ever entered. But in their picture something moved—a fat man, but growing leaner—struggling in utter weariness, driven on by hope that was born of ignorance, hope that would die with the dawn of desert knowledge. Dragging his feet, falling headlong, and dragging his body at times, biting the sand in his helplessness, driving himself in aimless circles like a fly on a hot stovetop. In their throats they felt his agony of thirst; they felt his body being devoured in the furnace of sun and sand; they felt all his suffering, for they knew—

"Them men don't know. Horgan don't know. The fat man don't know. But we—" Washoe shook his head.

"Murder! Worse 'n murder! They got horses back there—hear 'em? They can get in an' out on horses, maybe, but he— Pruett gulped.

"All right! Get up there and start," commanded the man who guarded the driver.

The driver was climbing in a nervous hurry upon the seat. Washoe saw that his gun had been taken by the highwayman. He gripped the reins and started to raise the whip. Behind the stage the passenger was talking again in a flurry of fear and rage.

"Highway robbery! You'll get life for this. I'll see you get life for this. Horgan, too. If it takes my last dollar. I'll see—"

The highwayman interrupted with a mirthless laugh.

"Life! Better stop talking. Get ahead there, now."

The bronchos straightened out. The stage started forward. The desert was saved from Travis. The highwaymen behind shoved their prisoner to one side, so they could watch the driver through the pass. And so the desert was saved. It was saved for Washoe and Pruett. This man upon whom

Travis depended to save his dam would never reach Bottleneck. The undimmed sun would continue to rise in crimson and shooting flames, the stars would declare their glory.

Agents of progress! Progress! Tomorrow, from Baldhead Mountain northward, or maybe to the south or the west, a tiny atom of humanity would be struggling in the gray and awful immensities. Horgan didn't know. He couldn't. But they who knew the wonders of the desert knew also its dreadfulness. How the fat man would suffer before he died!

Washoe groaned. He trembled lest he had been heard.

"Pruett, we got to do it!" He barely breathed the words.

"We got to."

Both brushed off their masks.

The stage was passing. No heroic gesture came to either of the desert rats. If they could attract the driver's attention, he might help.

"S-s-st!" signaled Washoe.

The answer did not come from the driver. It was a shot and the slap of a bullet against the boulder in front of Washoe. But Washoe had seen the swift movement on the other side of the bronchos, and in the passing of that same instant he also acted.

Agilely he flung himself down and to the left; and as the bronchos jerked the stage forward, exposing the man who had fired, Washoe's gun flamed.

Without waiting to see the effect of the shot—for he knew it—he flashed his revolver toward the two who were still guarding the passenger.

"Put 'em up!" Pruett was shrilling.

Two hands did come up, but with revolvers belching lead. Washoe felt a waspish stinging in his ear and scalp. He fired, but with aim disorganized by the shock of the bullet. Pruett fired, too, but those were automatics that were spouting at them. Pruett swerved half around, and his bullet went wide. The two streams of lead pounded the

rocks and drove the desert rats to cover.

The stage was stopped, and the driver was dodging along the opposite side of the pass, trying to get to the dead highwayman. The other two were running across the pass, with the double intention of finishing Washoe and Pruett and getting under cover themselves.

All this Washoe saw between two boulders, through which cleft he was trying to bring his gun to bear on the running men. But their rush carried them out of range and out of vision. In a moment they would be on him, and he popped up again, a very visible target.

THE driver had reached the dead highwayman and was stooping for the dead man's gun. But he couldn't save Washoe. Nothing, it seemed, could save him. Washoe was still dizzy from the crack on the head, and his gun was just wabbling around; moreover, he was staring straight into the muzzle of the advancing man's automatic. He tried to duck, knowing he would not be in time—flinching from the leaden death that would come hurtling toward him. And then—it did not come. He was still alive.

A very queer thing, that! It couldn't be that the driver had fired in time. It couldn't be, for the highwayman still stood there. No, that was some one else, standing over the crumpled bandit. Some one who, instead of pointing an automatic, was poising a rock over his head for another blow—but it was not needed. He was lifting the rock, bringing it down—Why, it was the fat man crashing that rock down upon the skull of the last of the bandits.

The stricken man collapsed like a doll. The fat man began dancing then, actually dancing! Flinging his arms about in a very ecstasy of rage and triumph and satisfied egotism. Chortling how the highwaymen had disre-

garded him, how they had thought he was harmless, how with his hands he had laid them both low.

"Jes' look at 'em now! An' they thought they could monkey with me. Thought they could carry me off like a kid. I showed 'em. I'll show Horgan, too. Guess jes' for this I'll flood this desert ankle-deep if I want to."

He paused with hand upraised. His eyes had fallen upon Washoe and Pruett, standing there in the rocks. He stiffened, and then dived swiftly for one of the fallen automatics. He pointed it waveringly at them, and his voice rose high with suspicion:

"And you! You two! What the devil are you doin' out here?"

Washoe faltered over the reply. He was still quite dizzy. And the fat man was very angry. But the driver, coming up, his revolver ready, placated the fat man.

"Jist two desert rats," he said. "You're likely to find 'em anywheres at all. S'pose they'll be migratin' outa here, though, if this country gets wet down."

Washoe and Pruett didn't wait for that—the wetting down of the desert and the fulfillment of Travis's dream. They weren't forgetting that the law was reaching out for them from Botleneck. The big white and yellow stars were presently their only company as they journeyed westward.

Around them was the aromatic scent of the mesquite and the cactus. They had bound their trifling wounds with healing herbs, and to their spiritual troubles had applied the reflection that above the Mohave Desert there were never flood waters.

Indeed, they were almost recovering their content, when, toward morning, old Washoe began to swear with the unprofane oaths of the desert men.

"By Crikey! By the Great Horn of Heaven! It sure drives me crazy to think—the way things turned out—we were agents of progress, too."

THE END.



She hurried away from the carcass of the foul bird

The Radio Flyers

Eric Redmond penetrates to the hollow earth's fantastic inner world—and plunges into mad adventures in that topsy-turvy kingdom of the old Vikings

By RALPH MILNE FARLEY

Author of "The Radio Man," "The Radio Beasts," and "The Radio Planet"

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

MYSTERIOUS radio messages which seem to come from underground to the northward, are fully received at last by means of underground antennæ. They tell of the secret polar expedition sent by the Milwaukee *Eagle*. Eric Redmond, and Angus Selkirk, war flyers, head the expedition, which started in the ship Coolidge, for the Greenland coast in 1925. They establish a base, then the two of them start out in their plane, on May 2, 1926, racing the Byrd and Amundsen expeditions.

Strange phenomena, such as warm north winds and ducks flying south for

the summer, seem to them to lend some reality to the Eskimo's superstitions of a warm land north of the ice; but they are amazed to find at 83° 3' north, 30° 6' west, an open stretch of water, with a beach, vegetation, and musk-ox! They land at "Palm Beach," as they christen it, then start again for the pole. A leak in the gas-line forces them to land, and the irregular ice smashes one ski and the propeller-blade. Eric takes blankets and food, and starts on a brief reconnoitering trip. When he returns—and he is sure of the berg beside which they landed—both Angus and the crippled plane are gone!

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for May 11.

Eric presses on toward the pole. Nearing it, he gets adrift on an iceberg, which carries him, as he thinks, across the pole, and down the other side of the world. Here everything is strange—a fixed sun directly overhead, tropical warmth, an upward-curving horizon. At last he figures it out—the world is hollow, with a central “sun”; and he has gone over the edge, at the polar orifice, and inside.

His iceberg melts, and he swims to an island, where he finds a girl with long golden braids. She speaks an ancient form of some Scandinavian tongue and he manages to converse in Swedish. She is Helga Uppri, descendant of the first bishop who came there from Greenland.

Suddenly she is snatched from sight by a group of “skraelings”—the old Viking term for Eskimos. Eric pursues, and kills three, but is finally captured. Suddenly a red-haired mammoth bursts upon the skraeling camp, trampling them. It seizes Eric and carries him off. He gets free, and the elephant stabs at him with its tusk, through a tree!

CHAPTER XI.

THE PLATEAU.

AS the tusk ripped through the tree, its end struck square upon the tin on Eric's belt; and, although it threw him backward with a bad bruise, it did not penetrate his body. Once again Eric's ration-tin had saved him from the mammoth.

The red beast immediately pulled backward to dislodge its ivory; but, in the pulling position, its head went straight forward instead of bowed down as in charging, and thus the upward-curving tusk remained securely hooked in the tree.

Redmond lost no time in hobbling away, along the path toward the plain. Although he was bent on putting as much distance as possible between him-

self and his late captor, his chief idea was to return to the skraeling encampment, and find if by any chance there was anything left of Helga Uppri.

Behind him, the trapped elephant snorted with exasperation. But soon there came a new note, one of real rage, and then of fear. Evidently some enemies of this pre-historic beast were taking advantage of its defenseless position. Then the sounds of the struggle ceased entirely.

The silence of the elephant might mean that the elephant was no longer a menace, but it portended instead danger from new enemies.

Eric hobbled on. He came to the trampled grass which marked the scene of his struggle with the five skraelings, and there, lying plainly before him, was the lost hunting-knife which had been wrenched from his hand in that struggle. Kneeling down, he backed around to it and picked it up with one shackled hand.

With the point of the knife, he dug a small deep hole in the ground, into which he forced the end of the handle, so that the blade projected upward. Then he sawed the braided leather ropes up and down along the blade, until his hands were free. It took only a moment more to release his feet, and cut the trailing rope from his neck. The ropes he saved; they might come in handy.

Thrusting the knife into its scabbard on his belt, he rose to his feet, and ran across the plain toward the cliffs.

And at the foot of the cliffs stood Helga! Helga, alive and well.

Like a long lost friend he greeted her. Then cut her bonds. Then asked: “How did you escape the elephant—the *umpnah*?”

“I realized what it was,” she replied, “and so lay still in the tent when my guards rushed out to join the fight. It was the only chance. When the *umpnah* knocked over my tent, as he did all the others, something at just that moment must have distracted his atten-

tion, for he turned away and did not trample on me. He did not return later. After he had left, I came out. The skraelings were all dead or gone. You were dead or gone. So I started for a place of safety. I am glad that you are not dead—or gone."

"And I am glad that you are glad," replied Eric simply.

She looked at him quizzically, so that he hastened to add: "But even gladder that you are alive and well."

He seized her hand, but suddenly she snatched it from his and pointed behind him.

"Look!" said she. "The skraelings!"

He turned and saw the two runners who had been sent to the beach and had thus escaped the massacre, now returning with a long curved ivory tusk over their shoulders. And with them walked a third skraeling, his arm in a crude rope sling.

At the same instant, the natives saw them; and, dropping the booty, came on toward them at a run.

"QUICK!" said Eric. "You spoke of safety. Is there a place of safety anywhere near here?"

"Yes," Helga replied. "Follow me." Turning, she led the way toward the cliff. At the foot of the cliff, a small tunnel in the shrubbery appeared. Dropping on her hands and knees, she plunged into it, and Eric followed. Finally they stood erect in a narrow cleft in the face of the cliff.

Then began the perilous ascent. By placing their feet and hands and knees in ridges and cracks on each side, they were able to worm their way slowly upward. Below them they could see the two able-bodied skraelings enter the chimney and ascend in pursuit. Unfortunately there was nothing to drop on the enemy.

Eric voiced this regret to the girl, but she replied: "Wait. All in good time."

The cleft became a round funnel, and then ended. They wriggled out onto the top. Beside the hole were a

dozen or more large round rocks, the size of a man's head or larger.

"I keep them there for that purpose," remarked Helga, as she rolled one into the chute from which they had just emerged. Result: a thud, two shrieks, a clatter, and then groans.

"Two less skraelings," said Helga.

"But we can't remain by the side of this hole all the rest of our lives, to roll stones down on skraelings," he objected.

"No?" said she with a mischievous smile. "Then observe this."

And she slid a long flat slab of slate across the top of the hole, covering it completely. The slab slid beneath a projecting arm of rock on one side of the hole and hooked into a socket on the other.

She explained: "The stone cannot slide back without first being unhooked. It cannot get unhooked, except by lifting on its rear end. The rear end cannot be reached from within the flue. Thus we are now safe."

"How did you ever invent it?" he marveled.

"I didn't," she explained. "I found it here. People must have used this plateau as a refuge years ago, for there is the remains of a town here. I have made over one of the houses, for me to live in. You can have one of the others, and live near me. There are plenty of them. Come."

And, taking his hand in hers, she led him across the meadow.

The knee-high grass was star-dotted with myriads of brilliant flowers of all the colors of the rainbow, daisylike, but unknown to Eric. Here and there were bushes and clumps of trees: pines, strange hardwoods, and some palms. The entire surface of the plateau, which measured about a mile in diameter, was level, except where pierced near one edge by a black sharp peak some two hundred feet high, very much resembling the *nunataks* which project above the surface of the inland ice of Greenland.

"The rock of the *skwaa*," she explained with a wave of her hand.

"And what is a *skwaa*?" asked Eric.

"A nasty beast," she replied, and that was all she vouchsafed on the subject.

So he inquired: "Are you sure that that tunnel is the only approach to this plateau?"

"Absolutely," Helga asserted. "I have searched every foot of the cliff, both top and bottom, and there is no other way."

Eric heaved a sigh of relief, and tightening his grip on her hand, smiled into her face.

"This is the life," said he in English.

She led him around a grove to what must once have been quite a pretentious little village of stone houses, now in a bad state of ruin. One showed signs of having been somewhat repaired.

"My home," she explained simply.

NEXT she showed him a spring of ice-cold water that welled up in the midst of the deserted village. From a tiny pool, just below the spring, she extracted the body of a rodent about the size of a cat.

"*Agunta*," she explained. "I catch them with snares."

Then she dug in a hole with the point of a charred stick, but the result disappointed her.

"My fire is dead," said she sadly. "I will require much time to start another one."

Here was Eric's chance to be a hero.

"Watch me," he said ostentatiously.

Shaving up some of the dried wood which lay piled near by, he produced his burning glass with a flourish, and soon had the satisfaction of seeing the smoldering mass burst into flames. Then he glanced up with pride, expecting to see a look of wonder in her blue eyes.

But she took the matter quite calmly.

"Oh, yes," said she. "My men do that frequently by catching the sun-

light in their shields. I have had no shield, and so must twirl a stick. But your little piece of ice is simpler to use and easier to carry than a shield. I must remember that."

Disgusted with himself for having tried to show off, Eric returned the lens to the pouch on his belt. Then a pang smote him. "Her men." Of course. She was not alone in this new world. And yet he had somehow felt, as he had walked along hand in hand with this Norse goddess, that all mankind had ceased to exist, save him and her and the skraelings.

As he fed the flames, and she deftly roasted the meat, Eric asked her: "Your men? Who are they?"

She smiled and answered: "Oh, Thorvald, and Hoglung, and Nils, and Mikjel, and—why?"

"Are you married?" he interrupted seriously.

"No!" said she, with a very positive inflection. "And that is the cause of all my troubles."

It was remarkable how rapidly Eric's knowledge of the Swedish language enabled him to drop back through the ages into the pre-Swedish tongue of the Vikings. It was much like a modern Englishman conversing with a man of the time of Chaucer. Or perhaps the speech of this fragment of the Vikings had developed along much the same lines as had the speech of those Vikings whose descendants made up the Swedish race. At all events, Eric Redmond and Helga Uppri were able to understand each other quite readily.

"Tell me about your troubles," he urged. "Here we are camping out together, and yet neither of us knows more than the mere name of the other."

"It is a long story," she began. "My father is the Christian bishop of this land, by direct descent from Eric Uppri, who is said by legend to have settled here a long, long time ago with colonists from a mythical country named Greenland, which is supposed to lie beyond the northern ice and snow,

and where there is supposed to be another sun which runs around in the sky and frequently disappears altogether. Of course, these are mere old wives' tales and superstitions, for such a sun would be absurd. My father's name is Thorvald. We are but a small tribe, compared with the thousands of skraelings who surround us. The skraelings are heathens and worship not the one true God.

"There is one tribe of skraelings which has had but little friction with ours. We might even be said to be at peace. About a hundred sleeps ago, the chief of this tribe of skraelings—his name being Goovah—sent an embassy to my father, suggesting a perpetual truce between our two peoples; and that, to bind the bargain, I be given in marriage to his son, Altoonah. Altoonah is not a bad-looking boy, as skraelings go; in fact, he must have some Viking blood. But, even so, such a match would be impious, impossible; for the inflexible law of our tribe forbids any mixing of the two races. Even to look upon a skraeling with pleasure, is punishable by death."

"Then how do you explain the apparent Viking strain in Altoonah?" Eric interrupted.

HELGA colored slightly, as she replied: "Our men are not always discreet, and besides the skraeling men frequently make captives of our women."

She continued: "So the offer of Eric Goovah was politely refused. But my cousin, Bror Hoglund, whom I have long suspected of harboring sentiments toward Astroo, the daughter of Chief Goovah, led me into an ambush of skraelings, who seized me and carried me far to the northward. My father cannot have guessed what became of me, for no punitive expedition has been launched against my captors. In fact, Bror was clever enough to make many tiger-tracks with a carved stick, and to leave blood and pieces of our clothing

lying about. So, if there is any hunt, it will be one of vengeance against tigers, rather than against skraelings.

"At last, many sleeps from home, I eluded them. Knowing that they would expect me to flee back toward my own people, I fled in the opposite direction, until I came here, bringing with me a skraeling spear, which I stole in my flight. On this plateau are small game and roots and fruits in abundance, but sometimes I have gone down to the plain below for larger game, or even to the beach for fish. Thus I have lived here alone, until the skraelings caught me at the cliff. Now tell me of you."

So Eric endeavored to convey to her some picture of American civilization. The girl listened wide-eyed and incredulous. But when he attempted to describe his trip to Greenland and the plane-journey of himself and Angus toward what they had thought was the North Pole, she was unable to grasp the idea of the plane at all.

"You are a pleasant spinner of tales," said she, "and will doubtless prove to be an entertaining companion, but I cannot quite believe that all you say is the truth. I hope you are not a skraeling."

"Do I look like a skraeling?" he asked with some pique.

"No, but I have seen others who did not. Anyway, I hope that you are not one."

"Why?"

But she colored slightly, and would not answer him.

The meal over, she took him by the hand and led him all about the plateau.

She showed him a large pool, where she was accustomed to bathe. She showed him where and how she snared the *aguntas* such as they had eaten. Also which fruits and roots were edible, and which were not. He chose a house near hers, and together they readjusted the stones, repaved the roof, and made the old ruin presentable. From time to time they ate together.

As her spear had been left at the shore the day she had been seized by the skraelings, he gave her his hunting-knife to take its place.

Eric's wrist-watch had been lost at some time during his captivity either by the skraelings or the mammoth, so he had no way of telling time, except by the conventions of this strange land.

Apparently one ate whenever one felt hungry and had food to satisfy one's hunger, and one slept after each second-meal. So two eats made a sleep, and a sleep was their unit of time, roughly corresponding to a day on the outer surface of the earth. A sleep was also the unit of distance: namely as far as you could walk in one day. Sometimes they used the unit "a look," meaning as far as one could see; but this was very unsatisfactory, as a sleep constituted anything from ten to twenty looks.

One day as they were strolling hand in hand through the meadows, Eric noticed a large bird soar off from "the rock of the *skwaa*." It was about the size of an eagle, or larger. Its bill was long and pointed and its neck crooked like a heron's. Its head was crested like a kingfisher, but with the crest much more pronounced, so as to balance its long bill. Its wings were leathery like those of a bat. And its color was dark slate-gray.

"A small *skwaa*," announced Helga with a wave of her free hand.

THIS gave Eric the clew as to how to get across the explanation which he had been trying, these many sleeps, to give her.

Said he: "I and my friend made a *skwaa*, a very big *skwaa* as long as seven men. In it we could fly as that *skwaa* does."

She dropped his hand, and looked at him with incredulity, not unmixed with horror.

"On my word of honor as a Christian," he added hastily.

"I believe you," said she simply, taking his hand again.

Then he continued his tale of the frozen north, ending with the statement that he had never quite given up hope that Angus would some day fly after him, even to this new world, and join him.

The next time that he slept, Helga for some reason felt restless. At last she got up to take a walk—in the moonlight, one might have said, but the central sun was shining pitilessly in the exact middle of the heavens, as it always did except when there were clouds or rain.

She walked to the edge of the plateau, and then along the edge, looking out from time to time over the surrounding country. At the northern extremity she stopped. Off into the distance rolled woods and fields, and beyond them she could see the dark blue-green of the sea, growing fainter and fainter as it curved upward to merge with the faintly luminous dome above.

Far, far off she could see a black speck against the gray of the sky. As she looked, it grew larger and larger. Now she could make out its form: a central body with a wing projecting to either side.

Nearer and nearer it came. It looked like a gigantic *skwaa*, larger than any she had ever seen. Why, this must be her friend's friend, winging his way to rejoin him. How glad Eric would be!

Should she go and awaken him? No. Let this be a surprise after his friend had landed. But she must attract Angus's attention in some way.

Rushing back to the village, she fanned her smoldering fire into a blaze, and then quenched it with moss to make a smoke. The huge *skwaa* was headed directly that way. Angus must see! Excitedly she waved a branch of leaves. The large winged form passed over.

Then circled. She had been seen. As it settled close to the village, she

ran to meet it. Oh, how happy Eric would be!

Meanwhile Eric slept on, all unconscious of any prospective bliss. Once a woman's scream seemed to pierce his slumbers, but he took it for a figment of a dream and slumbered on.

In due course of time—one couldn't say: "When morning came," for there is no morning nor evening, nor any other time of "day" in that strange land—he awoke. Helga was nowhere to be seen. Sleeping probably. Well, he would not disturb her until he had prepared breakfast for her. It would be a special treat. She usually got up first and prepared breakfast for him.

He found the remains of a smudge on the fire, and the embers nearly extinguished, but soon raised a blaze; then going to their "ice-chest," the little pool, he extracted a juicy bit of meat for their meal.

As he was cooking it, a familiar and distant purr smote his ears. Could it be—but of course not. The primitive peoples of this central world knew naught of aviation. And yet his ears could not deceive him. He stood up and scanned the sky. Sure enough, far to the northward was the unmistakable shape of a plane!

HASTILY the fire was resmudged, and soon a black column was pouring skyward. Snatching off his doeskin shirt, Eric climbed to the roof of his house and waved the garment frantically at the oncoming plane. It was his own plane, all right. He could now make out the outlines.

The motor was cut off. The plane shot down toward him. Then the power was put on again, and the plane circled, looking for a landing. He had been seen! Good old Angus had come for him!

The plane leveled off and landed on the plateau at some distance, and then turned and taxied toward the village. Eric climbed down off the house and ran to meet it. It was Angus all right,

Angus with a bushy red beard. Soon the two old friends were shaking hands, and amusedly comparing notes on the hirsute ornaments of each other's faces.

Then came the reaction, as Eric indignantly demanded: "Why did you fly away and leave me that night in the snowstorm?"

"Well, I like your nerve!" replied Angus. "You are as bad as one of these mothers who weep their eyes out over a lost child; and then when the little darling, whom they never hoped to see again, shows up, they spank him for getting lost."

"That's all very well," interjected Eric sternly, "but it doesn't explain why you left me."

"I didn't leave you," explained the other. "The plane left both of us. While you were off making your observations right after we crashed, I started in to take stock of our damages. The first thing that I did was to jack her up onto the landing-wheels to see how badly hurt the skis were. As I was lying under the fuselage looking at the skis, along came the snowstorm. A gust of wind struck the plane. I jumped to my feet, and just then the plane swung around, knocking me flat again. By the time that I scrambled to my feet once more, the plane was rolling off, headed south all by itself, and going strong: I rushed after it, and just barely succeeded in grasping the tail, before she got going too fast for me. As she careened over the ice, I managed to hoist myself onto the tail, and crawl along the fuselage into the cockpit.

"Then I attempted to turn her head into the wind, but she wouldn't turn. You see, the wind was going faster than she was, and so she didn't have any steerway. I didn't dare start the motor with one propeller blade broken, and I couldn't have started the motor if I had dared, for there was no way of giving it a spin. Finally one of the wheels hit something which sort of partially turned the plane; and then,

by jamming the rudder hard the wrong way, I managed to bring her up into the wind. Not until then did it occur to me to pull in the wheels. I did so, just before she started backing, and thus brought my wild coast to an end.

"Then I camped out in the lee of the plane. When the storm was over, I walked back to the place where we had crashed—luckily the storm had not entirely effaced the marks of the wheels—and found where you had camped. I followed your tracks back and forth—it was quite evident that you were hunting for the plane—until they definitely set out to the northward. Then I realized that you had given up all hope, and so had determined at least to reach the pole and die there. Am I right?"

"Yes," assented Eric.

Angus continued: "And so I went back to the scene of the crash. No use trying to catch you, with your head-start and your dogged determination. So I camped out, slept, and then carried the broken blade back to the plane. It was some job. For two weeks I worked on that plane, mortising the broken blade together, and shortening the other to match. It was the devil of a job, but I actually got the old bird to fly again. Then instead of returning to Disco Bay, I set out to find you. And all the thanks I get is a scolding."

Eric mumbled some sort of an apology.

ANGUS went on: "I followed your tracks until I came to where the ice was all breaking up under the influence of the south wind. There your trail ended. I hoped that you had drifted away on a cake. So I followed the drift—across the pole, I presume, and southward. You had the Pickering dingus, but the gyro-compass showed me that I was getting south again, and at what a rate! Finally this funny kind of sky shut over me like

a clam, and this strange new sun appeared, but still I followed the ice. There were some large bergs, and I thought you might be on one. One did have a bear on it, I remember."

"I was on that one," interjected Eric. "The bear had me treed in an ice cave."

"Then that's why I didn't see you," said Angus, "I didn't dare land in the water and sleep, for fear of the ice. So, when I finally sighted the shore, I was pretty well fagged out. I came down, and slept for a long time. Ever since then, I have been scouring all the surrounding country for you. Luckily my gas has held out nicely. My food lasted until I struck this strange world, since when I have found some small game. And—this will interest you—while I was monkeying with the plane back there on the Arctic ice, I received the news on our wireless that Byrd reached the pole on May 9, and Amundsen a few days later. Did you beat them?"

It was a long speech for the usually silent Scotsman.

Eric replied with a smile: "You mean that Byrd reached what he *thought* was the pole on May 9. I reached what I thought was the pole on May 12. But, at that, I did actually beat Byrd."

"How?"

"Because, I discovered that there really isn't any pole at all."

"What do you mean?" gasped Angus.

But Eric countered with: "Don't you realize where you are?"

"Not the slightest idea."

So Eric explained his theory, and the evidence which supported it.

"It listens well," commented the Scot. "The only flaw in it is that it can't possibly be so."

"Why not?" demanded the other.

"You forget gravity. If the earth is only a shell, it can't possibly have mass enough to cause as much gravity as we know exists. Unless, of course,

you agree with Einstein that gravity is only a state of mind."

"WHERE'S your memory of high school physics?" countered Eric. "Don't you remember that the nearer the center of attraction is to the thing attracted, the stronger will be the attraction."

"Oh, yes," admitted Angus, then he quoted in a singsong schoolboy voice: "Every particle in the universe attracts every other particle, in proportion to the product of their masses, and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between them." Isaac Walton."

"Isaac Newton," corrected Eric, then continued: "So you see, the fact that the earth is a shell and therefore light, is much more than offset by the fact that the center of attraction is now halfway between the inner and outer surfaces of the shell, and hence much nearer to the outer surface, than the center of the earth would be if the earth were solid. The scientists have always calculated an intense weight for the earth, much heavier than that of anything it could possibly be made out of. Now at last this absurdity is done away with. The shell earth can be made of very light material, and still exercise a force of gravitation equal to that which has been measured."

"Great work!" ejaculated the Scot. "Your discovery seems to be solving most of the questions of the universe."

The conversation lagged. Then, the first excitement of their reunion being over, Eric remembered Helga.

"Come," said he, "and I will introduce you to the most beautiful lady you have ever seen."

Angus at once became flustered.

"But I am not dressed," he objected. Like his friend, he was clad merely in an Eskimo undershirt.

"You're as dressed as I am, or as you are ever likely to be," replied Eric. "Come on."

And going to the door of Helga's stone hut, he knocked sharply. No answer. He knocked again. Still no answer. He pushed open the door, but she was not inside.

"She must have gone for a walk before I got up," he explained.

So together the two men hunted over the entire top of the plateau, but no Helga. And they found the slab still in place at the only possible exit from the plateau.

Eric was frantic! Where could the girl be?

CHAPTER XII.

THE SKRAELINGS AGAIN.

THERE was no doubt that the beautiful young Viking girl had vanished from off the plateau.

Hastily Eric sketched to Angus the events since his landing, and minutely described the girl's appearance. It was arranged that Angus was to take the plane and fly in ever widening circles about the plateau, while Eric was to set out on foot down the skraeling trail. Each was to return eight hours later, sleep, compare notes and set forth again. Selkirk lent Redmond his wrist-watch, for the former could use the clocks on the plane.

The firearms, except one rifle, were taken from the plane and left in Eric's stone house, but each man carried an automatic. The touch of this familiar weapon gave Eric renewed courage in this weird and ominous land. But then a doubt assailed him.

"How about gas?" he asked.

Angus smiled.

"Look at the meter," said he. "One of the tanks is still nearly full."

They set forth. The Scot soared with a roar. His friend watched him depart, then ran to the tunnel, slid back the slab that closed its top, and scrambled down. At the bottom he found the remains of the two skraelings who had been killed by Helga's rock the

day of his first arrival at the plateau. Practically all their flesh had been eaten off their bones, but he pulled the skeletons out onto the plain to clear the passage. Their two spears he stood up in the shaft, meaning to add them to his store of weapons on his return.

He reached the cliff above the beach and saw the skeletons of the three skraelings on the sand, but he did not descend.

On all the way from the plateau to the sea, he had seen no sign of the girl whom he was seeking.

So he retraced his steps to the foot of the plateau, and then turned along the path to the southward. He arrived at the remains of the native encampment, which the elephant had trampled underfoot. And then he passed on into the unknown.

If he had been versed in woodcraft, he would have noted recent skraeling footprints, and that these were headed along the trail in the opposite direction from that in which he was going; but, as it was, he saw nothing.

On through the jungle he went; and overhead burned the motionless sun, contradicting the testimony of his own knowledge that there was any such thing as time.

Clad as Eric was in a doeskin shirt, barefooted and bareheaded, tanned by exposure to the unceasing sun, he might have passed for a caveman searching for his mate, were it not for the automatic pistol strapped in a holster to his right hip.

After four hours, he paused for lunch, consisting of fruit, which he had brought along, so as not to waste any time with hunting or cooking. Then he pressed on for about an hour more. But the trail still wound its interminable course through the jungle, with not a sign which his civilized eyes could discern.

At the end of five hours, he turned back and retraced his steps to the plateau, thoroughly resolved that on the morrow he would set out along this

trail again, and would not return until he had ranged a journey of several sleeps along it.

The two spears were gone from the shaft.

He vaguely wondered what could have become of them, but the question did not give him much concern, for the rifles and pistols obviated the need for any such crude weapons as spears.

HE clambered up, and locked the stone firmly at the top. The plane had not yet returned, so the young man cooked supper alone in the deserted village, and then spent nearly two hours searching every inch of the plateau again for the missing Helga. One of the *skwaas* from the black pinnacle flew excitedly around for awhile, but there was no sign of the girl.

Neither did Angus show up. And now to his worry over the disappearance of the girl, was added a new worry over the failure of his friend Angus to return. Angus, who had so lately come back to him as from the dead, and now was inexplicably lost to him again.

Had Angus found Helga? And had he had to fight to rescue her? Perhaps, even at this moment, he was battling single-handed against hordes of the fierce captors of the beautiful Viking.

Or had the plane crashed many miles away across the trackless wastes of this new world? Was Angus dead, or injured, or was he alone on foot striving to find his way back to the plateau? And, if so, where was Helga? A hundred possibilities as to the fate of each of his friends, flooded Eric's mind. He brooded for quite awhile over his double bereavement. But there seemed to be nothing for him to do but wait.

At last Eric decided to turn in. In all of his fine-tooth combing of the plateau for his lost playmate, he had

not, of course, searched his own stone hut. Helga could not be expected to be there, for he would have seen her if she had entered it between the time that he left it that morning and the time when he had discovered her absence. Nor was she there.

But inside lurked four skraelings. As he entered, they fell upon him; and so sudden and unexpected was their onslaught, that they had him securely bound before he had scarcely begun to struggle. Then they dragged him from the hut, and across the plateau toward the sliding rock.

Eric, hoping that the plane would heave in sight at any moment, fought every foot of the way, and did everything that he could to delay matters. But it was no use. They prodded him with their spears, and dragged him by the neck, until, bleeding and exhausted, he reached the top of the shaft.

The rock was still in place, as he had left it, so how could the skraelings have gained the plateau?

When the solution finally dawned upon him, it was so simple that he cursed himself for not having thought of it before, and for not having done something to forestall such a happening. The skraelings, while he was away on his search for Helga, had sneaked up the shaft, had found the stone slid away, as, of course, he had had to leave it, and so had entered the plateau, hid, and awaited his return.

The plateau was a place of refuge, only if some one remained there to close the exit.

Two of the natives now entered the shaft, he was unshackled and pushed after them, and the other two followed. At the bottom, he was again tied. Then, with two skraelings ahead, and two behind, he crawled through the tunnel in the bushes, which led to the plain.

As he emerged, face down, some heavy swinging object grazed the side of his head, and he was seized roughly and dragged out. The two skraelings

who had preceded him, lay dead upon the ground.

WHEN Angus left the plateau, ten hours before this, he flew his plane in ever widening circles, scanning the countryside for signs of life.

He saw Eric descend the chute, emerge onto the clearing, cross it, and plunge into the woods toward the sea. But Eric was the only human being whom he saw.

Wider and wider he circled. The day dragged on, all the more monotonous because of the motionless central sun.

At last he descried smoke in the distance. At the edge of a large clearing sat a native village. Angus could see the skin tents and the dusky men and women walking among them.

They heard the noise of the plane. Several of them pointed upward. The others came piling out of the tents and stood staring at the sky in amazement.

Angus volplaned down, then cut in the motor again and circled close over their heads, expecting to see them scatter in terror, but they were much more surprised and interested than frightened.

Then it was his turn to be surprised and interested. For there among the swarthy naked Eskimos, stood a fair-skinned, golden-haired maiden. Her tresses seemed to Angus to be more ash-blond than Eric had described them, and her clothing had been changed from a leopard-skin flung across one shoulder, to a mere skirt of some dark brown woven material. But, as Eric had said, she was very stately and beautiful. Rather more beautiful than stately, Angus thought.

Grounding the plane as near to the village as he could, Angus leaped out, leaving the motor idling, and approached them with drawn automatic. But the nerves of the natives had not been quite equal to the close approach of this strange bird-thing. As he drew

near, they scattered into the bushes, the girl with them.

"The deuce," thought Angus, returning his gun to its holster, "hadn't Eric told her about me?"

But fortunately the girl's foot caught in some trailing vines, and she lagged behind the others.

In a moment Angus was upon her. Seizing her by the arm, he dragged her to her feet. She cringed away from him.

Not knowing one word of her language, all that he could say to reassure her was, "Eric. Eric."

But still she cringed. It didn't occur to him to call her by her own name.

The two stood facing each other, he with his hands encircling her upper arms. Each studied the other.

He was horribly embarrassed by her lack of clothing. But there was no doubting that she was very beautiful. The contact with her thrilled Angus, who had never been interested in the other sex before.

She studied his face. Then she smiled: A smile slightly mischievous, it seemed to him.

"*Umpnah*," said she.

"I don't know what '*umpnah*' means," he replied in English, "but I hope that it means 'Home, James!' Anyhow, you're coming home with me, young lady, to Eric."

To Eric! He suddenly felt an unexplainable resentment toward his friend.

He indicated to the girl that she was to accompany him; and she, with a toss of her flaxen head and a shrug of her rounded shoulders, and a pout of her pretty mouth, started off in the direction indicated. But he took no chances, and kept a tight hold on one of her arms.

Gradually, as they walked along toward the airplane, she edged closer and closer to him, glancing up at him shyly—or was it slyly—from under long lashes. He was not a little disturbed. What business had Eric's girl vamp-

ing him? But the sensation was decidedly pleasant and stimulating to his pride. Perhaps he could have been a lion with the ladies, back in Milwaukee, if he had only tried. The idea was quite intriguing.

A SPEAR, whizzing through the air close to his neck, interrupted his day dreams.

"Come on!" he cried. "We've got to run for it."

The girl seemed to understand his meaning, if not his language, and together they raced for the plane, the skraelings pouring out of the woods after them.

The two reached the craft with their pursuers scarcely a spear's throw behind. To get aboard now was out of the question, for they would have been nailed before they could get halfway over the side. So Angus turned at bay; and, drawing his automatic again, pumped seven shots into the oncoming horde. The noise, and the effect of the bullets on their companions, halted the skraelings. But they were still too close for comfort. Angus shoved in a second clip of cartridges, motioned them back, and then fired again; whereat they broke and ran for a short distance, then reformed and stood menacing. All the while the girl clung close to him, with warm and quivering body.

Angus fired every clip that he had, before daring to turn and enter the plane. But at last, his ammunition gone, there was nothing else left to do.

Boosting the girl into the rear seat, he clambered into the front himself, and they were off.

Just for a full measure, he taxied straight at the enemy before taking to the air; and this nearly proved his undoing, for the plane received a spear through its wing, from one of the skraelings whose anger outweighed his fear.

Then Selkirk and his fair companion sped off toward the plateau, and soon

it loomed in sight. But Angus sensed that something was wrong with the machine. Not the slightest change of the sound of the motor indicated any trouble. But that sinking, sickening, out-of-gas feeling, so well known to motorists, just before the car stops, is practically the same sensation in a plane.

He soared and looked for a place to land. The engine coughed once or twice, sputtered, and then faded completely.

Angus saw a field, made for it, just barely cleared the tops of the trees at its edge, and settled neatly into the center. The girl sensed that something was wrong, and patted him sympathetically.

They dismounted. He examined the gauge. Still nearly full. Then he tapped each of the tanks. Dry as a bone. The gauge had stuck, and so deceived him. There was not a drop of gas left. Nothing to do but walk to the plateau, which he had seen but a short way ahead in the direction in which he had been traveling.

No filling-station would ever restore his ship to life, for there were no filling-stations in this strange world. His ship was dead, doomed, done for forever.

Taking his rifle and ammunition, and heaving a sigh, he prepared to set out on foot for the plateau. He hated to leave the plane, which had carried him so far. But there was no alternative. It would never carry him, or any one else, again.

He had become almost as attached to this craft as a man is to his horse. He had seen it grow from a colt, as it were. All through the long winter in Milwaukee he had watched it grow, and had watched it with a full realization of the noble task assigned to it.

It had carried him over the Greenland ice-cap, to the fertile little harbor in northeast Greenland, and then on into the frozen north. He had nursed it back to health after it had crashed

against the iceberg. It had then carried him across the pole—or what passes current for the pole—and down into this strange primeval land below the earth. It had found his pal, Eric Redmond, for him. It had brought him to this beautiful girl.

And now it lay dead. Never again would his Pegasus soar aloft. Like a dead animal it lay, as though merely sleeping. So far as appearances went, it was perfect in every detail, ready to fly again at a touch of his guiding hand. And it really was perfect, perfect like a dead body, lacking nothing except merely the spark of life.

WITH a last fond look at his steed of the air paths, he took the girl's hand and set resolutely forth, while she trudged along beside him. Every now and then, the girl would stop and stagger a bit, and then he would put his arm around her to steady her, and she would lean against him and smile up into his face.

A very interesting game, although not particularly loyal to Eric. But—oh, curse Eric, anyhow!

After all, Eric had never said that he loved the girl. What if Eric had seen her first? This was a free country. Sophistry—but very comforting.

They entered the clearing at the foot of the plateau, hand in hand. It was very late, nearly ten hours since he had departed in the airplane, and yet still the motionless sun hung in the exact zenith overhead.

As they neared the cliff, five figures appeared at the top of the rocks. Pulling the girl down beside him, Angus took cover behind a bush.

Four of the figures were skraelings. The fifth was Eric, bound and with a rope around his neck. Angus drew a careful bead on one of the four, and pulled the trigger—but only a click resulted. Quickly he threw the bolt, but no cartridge was expelled. Instead there came a crunching sound. The rifle had jammed!

Feverishly he worked on the piece for a few moments, until he realized that nothing short of a complete disassembly could remedy the situation. When he glanced up again, the last of the skraelings was entering the top of the shaft.

Motioning to the girl to lie where she was, he sped across the prairie, rifle in hand, to the foot of the shaft. There beside the entrance to the low tunnel through the bushes, he waited, his gun with butt upraised and the barrel held in his hands.

As the first skraeling emerged from the hole, the rifle fell with a resounding thwack on the base of his skull. He was seized and dragged quickly out, to make room for the next. Crack! Another fell.

Then the butt of the musket descended on the head of the third. But the third was Eric! Angus realized this too late to stay the blow, but in time to alter its direction sufficiently so that it merely grazed the side of his friend's head. Hastily he dragged Eric to one side, and slit his bonds.

The next man in the passage, sensing trouble, rushed out and was half on his feet before Angus could return to his post. Down crashed the rifle-butt, but the skraeling parried it neatly with his spear-haft, and then lunged at his antagonist. Meanwhile Eric lay half stunned on the ground.

The fourth skraeling emerged and rushed at Angus with uplifted spear. The Scot was having trouble enough already with the other, bayonet-fencing without any bayonet. He could never stand-off two of them.

But as the fourth skraeling passed Eric, Eric tripped him with his foot; and the spear, which was just about to be launched, sped harmlessly to one side. Then Eric grappled that skraeling. Over and over they rolled on the ground in each other's embrace; while the two men who were still standing, fenced together, one with a spear and the other with a mere rifle.

Finally the two rolling fighters crashed into the backs of the knees of the native who was contending with Angus. Up went the skraeling's hands as he toppled over backward. A particularly vicious swipe beside the ear with Angus's rifle-butt laid him low, and then a blow on the back took all the wind out of Eric's assailant.

"Never hit a fellow when he is down," admonished Eric, getting to his feet.

Angus quoted: "A man may be down, but he is never out." Picking up one of the skraeling spears, he advanced menacingly toward the moaning native.

"I am a practical man," he added, and thereat drove the spear successively into each of the recumbent forms. Eric shuddered, then nodded.

"After all a dead skraeling is the only kind of good skraeling. But they do look so much like our old friends, the Eskimos of Disco Bay."

Then the two survivors solemnly shook hands.

WHEN they had caught their breath again, Eric asked: "What have you done with the plane?"

"Never mind the plane," Angus replied, "I've found Helga Uppri."

The light of relief and joy that flooded Redmond's face convinced his friend in an instant that all the latter's arguments, as to Redmond's not loving the girl and as to his own right to entertain a heart-interest in her, had been mere sophistries.

"Where?" exclaimed Eric, "Where is she?"

For reply Angus turned toward the bush where the girl was concealed, and called: "Hello, there!"

The slim, straight figure of the maiden stood up. With a gasp of pleasure and recognition, Eric raced across the plain toward her.

But halfway to the bush he stopped. Angus caught up with him, and re-

quested: "Introduce me to your friend, will you?"

But Eric turned toward him, with a look of deep pain in his eyes, and said: "That isn't Helga at all. You've grabbed the wrong girl."

For a moment the Scot was dumfounded at his friend's loss. And then he began to realize what this meant to him. Eric's loss was his gain. As Eric slumped with despair, Angus straightened up, smiled, and then ran to the girl and clasped her in his arms, like one long missing and now found again—exactly as Eric would probably have clasped Helga, if this had been she.

But where was Helga? And who was this strange girl? Eric was overwhelmed with grief, and Angus with curiosity.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FLIGHT OF THE SKWAA.

ERIC was plunged in gloom. He had not fully realized before how much Helga had come to mean to him. He firmly resolved never to rest, and to range the whole surface of the interior of the earth, if necessary, until he found her again.

Meanwhile it would be only polite to share as far as possible in his friend's joy and happiness. So he advanced to where Angus and the strange young lady stood locked in each other's embrace.

The Scot hailed him. "Can you understand the native language? Of course, you can, for you have talked with your Helga. Then please translate for me to this girl, for I want to find out who she is."

Said Eric in the Norse tongue: "Welcome, gracious lady. My friend here cannot talk your language, and so wishes me to ask you your name."

But she shook her head, and then there fell from her mouth a perfect torrent of guttural sounds.

"She seems to be a skraeling," Eric

announced, "though all I can make out is '*umpnah, umpnah*.'"

"What does that mean?" asked Selkirk. "She has kept saying that to me; and, from her tone, I gather that it is a term of endearment. Is it?"

In Eric's mind there arose a picture of a sudden awakening, tents trampled underfoot, skraelings trod to pulp or bashed against trees, and general confusion, all amid shouts of "*Umpnah! Umpnah!*"

He smiled and said: "No, it is hardly a term of endearment. It means a wild bull-elephant on a rampage."

Angus grimaced.

"Well!" said a cold voice behind them.

Eric turned, and there stood Helga, majestic and forbidding.

"Helga!" he cried, rushing toward her with outstretched hands.

But she motioned him away.

"Who," she asked, "are those?"

"This is Angus Selkirk, my long-lost friend," he announced. "He and I have been hunting everywhere for you ever since you disappeared from the plateau. He arrived just as I arose from my last sleep; and, when we went to look for you, you were gone. Where have you been? We have searched all over, I on foot, and he in our *skwaa*. We were terribly worried."

"You looked it," she replied sarcastically. "You were so interested talking to that person, that you did not even notice me as I approached."

"Come on," interjected Angus in English. "Introduce me to your lady friend. For I take it that this is Helga."

So half in English, half in Norse, Eric said: "Helga, this is Angus Selkirk. Angus, this is Helga Uppri."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Uppri," said the Scot.

"And who is that woman?" asked Helga, ignoring the introduction.

"I'm sure I don't know," replied Eric, a bit angered. "Ask her yourself."

Helga turned toward the other girl. "Who are you, young lady?" she asked in a lorgnette tone of voice.

Again there fell from the lips of the girl a torrent of guttural sounds.

"It doesn't matter who she is," announced Helga, "for she is merely a skraeling."

Eric was not surprised, as he had already suspected this from the strange girl's language.

"But Angus wishes to know," insisted he.

"It really doesn't matter," repeated the Viking girl, "for, being a skraeling, she will, of course, be my slave."

"But Angus will certainly object to that. He quite evidently cares for her."

"Is that so? Well, it seems to me that you are doing the objecting."

ERIC began to catch on, as he really should have done earlier in the conversation. Meanwhile Angus and the skraeling girl stood by, a bit bewildered. Of course, neither of them could understand the conversation which was being held in Norse, but they could easily see that a disagreement was taking place, and neither of them could conceive what the trouble could possibly be about.

Said Eric: "You don't mean to imply that I am interested in this person, do you?"

"Why not?" countered Helga, with honeyed guile. "She is very beautiful."

"Is she?" asked Eric, with some surprise. "I hadn't noticed."

"You mean to say that you didn't even think to notice whether or not this creature was pretty?" inquired Helga incredulously.

"Why should I?" asked Eric. "I was worried to death about your disappearance. Angus flew off in the *skwaa* to look for you, and I hunted on foot. Angus came back and said that he had found you. Across the field stood a blond girl. Full of joy, I rushed forward to greet my long-lost

Helga. And it wasn't you! Then Angus asked me to interpret for him. And I was just trying to do so, when my grief turned to joy again, for there you were, safe and sound. Yet you scold me. What have I done? Except to lose you, and miss you, and hunt for you."

His sincerity was so evident that she was somewhat mollified. Gazing at the other pair through narrowed lids, she nodded her head slowly to herself, with a smile that took in all of the present, some of the past, and considerable of the future.

Then turning toward Redmond with a disarming radiance, and touching him lightly on the arm, she said: "Forgive me, I am very tired."

Eric thought of two replies to make. One was: "You have been acting as though you were." The other was: "You poor dear, there is nothing to forgive."

Luckily he said the second, or the battle would have been on again. And yet she had truly been behaving just like a spoiled child, and there was very much to forgive.

Striding majestically forward, Helga graciously held out her hand to the Scot, saying, while Eric translated: "Welcome, friend of my friend. I trust that you will make your home with us for a long time."

Turning toward the girl, who was standing beside Selkirk, and who up to this time she had ignored, she put several questions to her in gutturals, to which the girl replied.

The conversation between those two beautiful women was indescribable, but I shall attempt to describe it as Eric Redmond reported it to me, augmented by my own experience of similar situations.

A true English gentleman of the colonial service can address a Hindu, without arrogance or insult, and yet with a biting directness and assuredness, which puts the latter absolutely in his place in the social scale of India.

And the Hindu, if, for example, he be a prince of that race, can reply without servility on the one hand or effrontery on the other, looking the Englishman squarely in the eye, recognizing the Englishman's position, and yet maintaining his own integrity, and his belief—in a way—in his own superiority. And all this can take place in calm detachment, without either friendliness or antagonism.

An unlettered captain of industry and a technical expert in his employ can confer without any letting-down of the social barriers between them, with mutual respect, and mutual contempt.

SUCH was the meeting between Helga Uppri, the Norse princess, and this skraeling maid, whom Angus had somehow acquired. Each bore herself regally, and the situation fairly seethed with dignity. Yet neither of them overplayed, and there was no melodrama.

Finally a look of almost human amusement appeared on Helga's face, as she turned to Eric and reported: "The skraeling girl says that she loves old elephant-face."

Eric laughed, and in turn translated this to Angus, who grimaced at the description of himself.

Helga added, for Eric's ears alone: "This introduces a complication. It is death to love a skraeling."

"But," he objected, "my friend is not a Viking. The laws of the Vikings apply only to the Vikings."

"He is either a Viking or a skraeling," she asserted with finality, "for those are the only two races in the world."

Selkirk interjected, as soon as he had an opening: "Why does the girl call me 'old elephant-face'? My nose isn't unduly long."

"No," replied Redmond. "It is because of your red hair and beard."

"But elephants don't have red hair and a beard!"

"Don't they, though? You have

never seen one of the primeval mammoths of this world."

"Elephant-face. Hmm," ruminated Angus, then: "Ask her who she is."

This question was relayed through Helga, and the answer was relayed back through Helga and Eric.

"She says that she is Astroo, daughter of Chief Goovah. It is she whom my cousin Bror Hoglund loves, and for love of whom he betrayed me to the skraelings. But she cares not for him. It was her own people that Angus fought and killed, when he mistakenly thought that he was rescuing me. She says that elephant-face is very brave to kill so many Innuits, as the skraelings call themselves. She wants elephant-face to kill my cousin Bror, too."

Eric explained to Angus how Hoglund had betrayed Helga.

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to add him to my list," replied Angus. He little knew then what was to take place between him and Hoglund at a later date.

Then, with a little bitterness in her voice, Helga asked: "And now perhaps you will care to know what has happened to me!"

Again Eric's choice of tactful words saved him.

Said he: "Helga, I have been so glad to get you back again, that I haven't questioned my good fortune by asking any details."

The girl smiled at him indulgently.

"I see that you want to know," she said, seating herself on the grass, "so I shall tell you. When I lay down for the last sleep, I felt restless, so finally I got up and went for a little walk about the plateau. Way off over the sea I saw a *skwaa*, larger, much larger than any I had ever seen before in all my life. Remembering what you had said about you and your friend flying in a thing like an enormous *skwaa*, I ran out and hailed this one, thinking all the while how glad that you would be to know of your friend's arrival.

"Down swooped the *skwaa*, but there was no man in it. It was a real *skwaa*!"

"Oh, Helga!" cried Eric.

She continued: "It grabbed me in its claws and flapped away. I shrieked once, and then fainted. When I came to my senses again, we were way up in the air, and the beast was floating along with its leathery wings outstretched and motionless. Never shall I want to fly in your *skwaa*-thing, if it is like that. It was terrifying!"

"You will never have to, my dear," said Eric to himself. "For our *skwaa* is, alas, no more.

THE girl went on with her story: "But I must have been very heavy for it. It shifted its feet once or twice, as though to drop me. Its claws hurt me terribly. Then, raising its wings to a slightly higher angle, it settled slowly to the ground. My right arm was free. I drew the knife which you gave me, and waited. I knew that I was taking a terrible chance. If I missed, that sharp beak would rend me to bits. But the chance had to be taken. At last my body touched the earth. The *skwaa* perched upon me, stretched his ungainly neck, and flapped his wings slowly once or twice before furling them. I could see the skinny bones of his chest, under the arms, just behind and below the great muscles that joined his shoulders to his breast-bone. I could see his huge heart beating beneath his leathery skin. And at that spot I struck. Struck once with all my might. The nasty blood gushed over me. He let out a raucous squawk, made one drive at me with his great head, and then shrank together and toppled off me onto the ground. I was saved.

"Returning the knife to its sheath, I started out, in a hurry to get away from the stinking carcass. The stinking blood on my leopard-skin, I could not escape. Luckily I had noted the direction from which we had come just

before the *skwaa* alighted, so back in that direction I set forth. On and on I walked, stopping only for a bite of fruit here and there. Once I had to clamber into a tree, to let a herd of wild dogs pass, but they only lingered awhile to sniff, and did not stay. Finally I came in sight of the cliffs of our plateau. Our home. And found you with another woman."

But this time there was a twinkle in Helga's eye, and no malice in her voice.

They gazed across at the other two, who were seated facing them, side by side, leaning together, looking at them with unseeing eyes. Helga's hand stole into Eric's. And thus the four sat for several minutes.

"Is any one hungry?" Helga asked in two languages, and Eric repeated the question in English.

All admitted that they were. Stiffly they arose to their feet, Helga and Eric the more stiffly because of her wounds from the talons of the *skwaa*.

Suddenly the girl with Angus uttered an exclamation.

"Quick!" interpreted Helga. "She says her people come."

And a horde of naked yellow men poured out of the woods to the south, and ran along the path at the base of the cliff.

The four were about halfway from the woods to the tunnel.

"Follow me," shouted Helga, and the four dashed for the entrance.

Through the bushes crawled the two girls. Eric and Angus, each picking up one of the spears left from their last encounter, backed after them. The moment the girls reached the shaft, Helga gave a sharp guttural command, and Astroo started working her way upward. Helga followed.

As the two girls appeared in the cleft above the tops of the shrubbery, a howl of rage arose from the natives, who had halted outside the brush-tunnel, and had evidently been momentarily stayed by seeing the dead bodies of their four compatriots.

"Tell them," commanded Helga softly, "that you are not a captive. That we are your friends. And that, if they do not go away and leave you in peace, you will not answer for what your father will do to them."

"And if I do not tell them this?" asked the skraeling maid tentatively.

For answer Helga drew her knife.

But Astroo laughed, and said: "I fear not your knife. But I will say it for the sake of elephant-face."

SHE spoke as directed. One of the braves replied: "If these Vikings be friends of yours, permit us to enter and greet them."

Helga translated the conversation to Eric.

"Tell them," said he, "that whoever enters dies, as did the four on the ground outside, for we be mighty warriors who slayed four armed skraelings without weapons ourselves. We are friends of Astroo and the skraelings, it is true, but only at a safe distance."

Helga repeated the message to the enemy. Meanwhile the two girls edged slowly, almost imperceptibly, upward. But one of the natives had started to crawl through the tunnel in the bushes, and Angus promptly nailed him with a spear. Another skraeling just behind him gave the alarm, and a shower of spears flew across, through and over the bushes.

The two young men had guessed what was coming, and ducked. A few of the missiles clattered above them into the aperture. Several slid spent beside them. But most were stopped by the bushes. One went too high.

"I'm hit!" screamed Helga, and toppled down upon her two men.

A spear projected from her left breast just below the shoulder. Eric caught her as she fell, snatched out the spear, and attempted to stanch the blood with one of her yellow braids.

The tunnel in the bushes was full of skraelings, but Angus jabbed them back with his spear. He pushed his useless

rifle into the bushes. Astroo continued to scramble up the flue, volubly cursing her fellow-tribesmen in their own tongue, and assuring them of vengeance when her father should hear of this. Helga hung limp in Eric's arms.

"This can't go on forever," remarked the Scot dryly. "We've got to do something."

Helga opened her eyes dazedly.

"Leave me," she urged. "You can make the top alone. It is your only chance."

"Never!" shouted Eric.

She smiled wanly.

"Come then," said she. "I will try to climb."

And staggering out of his arms, she started with weak and trembling feet and knees and hands to make her way upward. Eric followed.

Another angry growl greeted their appearance above the bushes. A few spears were raised to hurl at them, but just at this moment a shower of rocks from the top of the cliff sent the natives recoiling back in confusion. Astroo had gained the summit, and was using Helga's store of missiles.

Angus took advantage of this diversion to follow the two above him. And behind him pressed several skraelings.

He hurled his spear down at them; and, before they could recover, he was out of reach of their spears. But up the shaft they came after him. The crowd on the ground had now recovered from their surprise at the stones which had fallen among them, and rushed back to the edge of the bushes which skirted the foot of the cliff. But they no longer dared to cast any spears, for fear of hitting their own men in the shaft below Angus.

By this time Eric and Helga were out of range. However, they were making such slow speed that they blocked the escape of Angus from the enemy below. One of these grasped his ankle, and sought to drag him down. A quick shake of his foot not

only freed him from the other's grasp, but also threw the other off his balance. With a cry of dismay, the skraeling fell upon the man below him. He fell upon the next, and like dominoes the skraelings clattered down to a heap at the bottom.

THERE was much moaning below, and it required considerable generalship and the sorting-out of the well from the injured, before the expedition was in any condition to start its upward journey again. But, when finally it came, it came with such speed that it rapidly overhauled poor Angus.

This time, when the foremost native caught up with him, the native took the precaution to brace himself well before reaching out for Angus. Angus kicked the skraeling in the face, in return for which the skraeling snapped and bit at his foot.

Helga arrived at the top. Astroo leaned down and hauled her through the opening, and she lay limp and wet on the rocks at the summit, the blood flowing freely from her wound because of her exertions.

Eric scrambled out after her and seized her in his arms. Astroo leaned over the edge of the hole and peered down, then shrieked something in her own language.

Helga roused herself.

"Quick!" cried she. "The girl says that they have got elephant-face."

Eric leaped to the opening. The foremost skraeling had Angus by one ankle, and Angus was unable to shake him off. Reaching down into the hole, Eric seized his friend's wrist, and hauled.

Astroo rolled a stone to the edge, and awaited an opportunity. The opportunity came. She pushed the stone into the chasm. Crash, it fell on the head of the skraeling, who went limp, releasing his hold on the ankle of the Scot.

But this time, the skraelings were braced for such an eventuality. They caught the body of their friend. They

caught, and passed down, the stone. They could not, however, get by the body to get at Angus.

Helping hands reached through the opening and pulled him to the top.

Eric looked around for more stones to roll down upon the enemy, but there were none; Astroo had used them all. But now the slab was slid into place and hooked, thus securely locking the only entrance to the plateau. Their stronghold was safe from intrusion.

Once more Eric took Helga in his arms. Astroo and Angus brought moss to stop the flow of blood. And the skraelings pounded and raged against the under side of the slab.

Helga was weakening rapidly. She opened her eyes and made a faint effort to sit up, then she slumped back into the supporting arms.

"Eric," she softly said, "I love you. Good-by."

Her eyes closed. Her body relaxed and lay still.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SIEGE OF THE PLATEAU.

HELGA, his Helga, was dead! Oblivious of the presence of the other two, Eric covered the still face with kisses.

"Helga! Helga!" he moaned. "Come back to me! Come back to me!"

Then, in a frenzy, he seized her arms, and shook her limp form.

But, at that, Angus intervened. Laying a sympathetic, but firm hand on Eric's shoulder, he commanded: "No! Don't do that."

Eric raised a haggard face to his, and inquired in a listless voice: "Why not?"

"Because," his friend replied, "you might start the wound bleeding again."

Eric smiled a bitter smile.

"Would that do any harm?" he asked. "She's dead, anyhow, isn't she?"

"Let's see," said Angus.

Eric, now calmer and in his right senses again, felt of Helga's wrist. But not a sign of life. Then he placed one ear over her heart, and thought that he discerned a slight sound. Taking out his burning-glass, and polishing it on his doeskin shirt, he held it to her mouth. It clouded slightly. A look of hope began to dawn on his face.

Selkirk at once took command of the situation.

"Run for water!" he cried. "Cold water! You know this place better than I do. Quick!"

Off sped the other, love and hope lending wings to his heels. Astroo took Helga's head in her lap, and she and the Scot chafed the cold wrists, as they waited for Eric's return.

Back againsped Eric, with one of Helga's bark cooking-utensils full of icy water from the village spring; with it he bathed her face, while the other two massaged her extremities.

At last the still chest expanded and fell again with a deep sigh, and the closed eyelids flickered open. Helga Uppri lived!

Eric flung himself forward to seize her in his arms once more, but Angus warded him off, saying: "She must have absolute rest, now."

Helga took a few sips of the cold water. Then the newly opened eyelids closed again, but this time to sleep. Eric brought skins from her stone hut, and with these they made a pillow for her head, and covered her legs, and shielded her face from the sun.

Meanwhile Angus shot an *agunta*—hunting at some distance from the sleeping girl, so as not to disturb her rest—and Astroo stewed it and also made a savory broth, while Eric stood guard over Helga. The skraelings had ceased their pounding on the bottom side of the piece of slate which closed the top of the tunnel, and were ominously quiet. Directly overhead burned the motionless sun.

After awhile, Astroo came, bringing

a haunch of *agunta* for Eric, and some broth for the sick girl; but, as the latter was still sleeping peacefully, they did not disturb her.

Redmond looked at his friend's wrist-watch, which he was wearing. Three o'clock. Three o'clock what? Morning? Or evening? He looked up at the sky, where the sun registered high noon, as always. Then he noticed that the watch had stopped, anyhow. So it wasn't necessarily three o'clock, either A.M. or P.M., after all.

Since he had last arisen from sleep, how much time had elapsed? He knew not, and had no means of telling. It might be hours, or days.

AS he mused and ate and watched, the skraeling maid walked to the edge of the cliff and looked over, then motioned excitedly to Eric. Leaving his charge, he quickly joined her.

The skraelings had built a small fire on the plain below. Some were replenishing this; but most of them were engaged in carting sticks and brush and rubbish to the foot of the cliff, and through the tunnel of bushes into the cleft in the rocks. Eric took in the situation at a glance. The enemy was planning to build a fire in the chute, crack the slate slab which closed its top, and thus gain entrance to the plateau. There was no time to lose!

Motioning to the girl to stay with Helga, he raced across the fields to the deserted stone village, where he found Angus contentedly seated by a fire, picking savory meat from the remains of the carcass of the *agunta*.

As he approached at top speed, the Scot looked up from his repast with a grin of amusement, and asked: "Hungry as all that? Well, this horse-meat is pretty good."

But Redmond cut him short with: "The skraelings! They are building a fire in the chute, to crack the cover."

Selkirk leaped to his feet, galvanized into action.

"We must fight fire with water,"

said he, seizing two bark buckets, and running to the spring.

Eric followed with another. But when they had filled them, Angus, instead of carrying his to the scene of the enemy operations, placed it instead carefully over the fire.

"Why hot water?" Eric asked.

Angus smiled, and replied: "Because this water is not to put out the fire. It's to put out the *skraelings*."

"Oh, I see," said Eric, placing his bucket beside the other's.

A watched pot never boils, and two watched pots boil even more slowly. The two men paced up and down with irritation, feeding the flames from time to time. But at last the water was seething. Then, and not until then, did they run to the edge of the cliff with the buckets.

Quietly they slid the stone aside and peered down. Sticks were massed in the top of the chute for a distance of about ten feet, but through the sticks they could see a line of *skraelings* extending all the way from the sticks to the bottom, and busily engaged in passing up more sticks one to the other.

"A regular bucket line," whispered Eric.

Angus whispered back: "Then let's show them something new in the bucket line."

The enemy evidently did not realize that the slab had been removed and that they were being watched. With the utmost silence and secrecy they worked, confident that their plans were not even suspected. Load after load of inflammable materials was brought to the edge of the bushes, and was pushed through the brush-tunnel to the foot of the cliff. Stick after stick was passed from man to man, to be finally wedged in place by the *skraeling* at the top.

And all the while the two Americans watched them with an amused smile. So secretively and confidently they worked, that it seemed almost a shame to rudely interrupt their little game.

But the water must not be allowed to cool.

Just then, the *skraeling* at the top looked up, looked squarely into the eyes of Eric and Angus.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.



Chicago's Subway

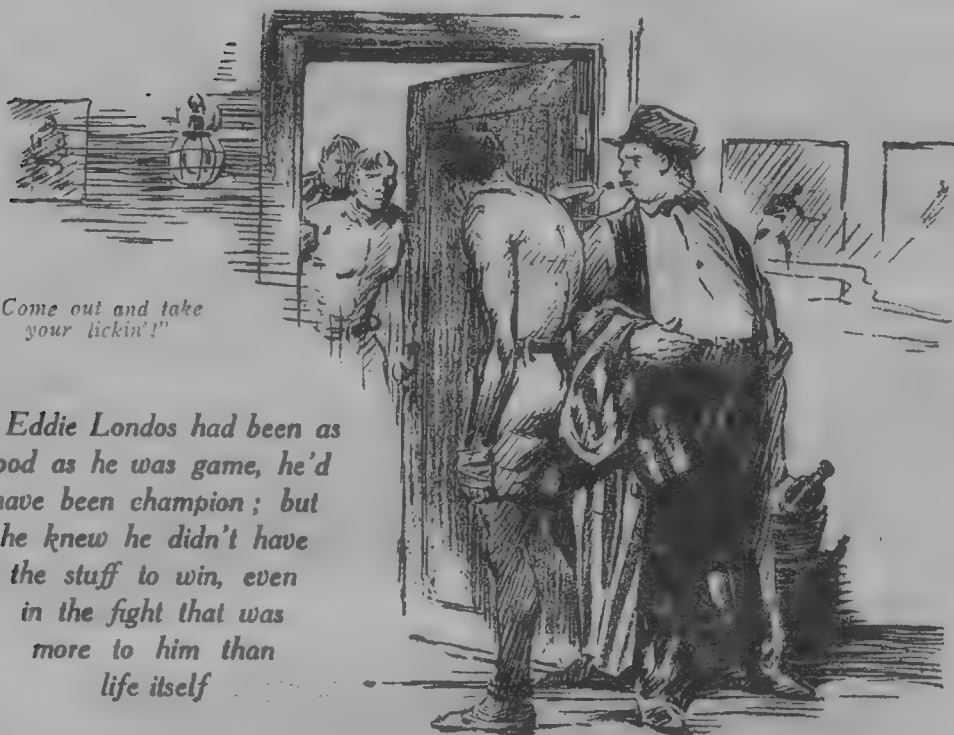
UNKNOWN to the general public, Chicago has a subway. It is not of the same design and use as those of other great cities. It is extremely useful, inasmuch as it takes a great freight traffic off the streets and removes enormous quantities of refuse quietly and efficiently.

It is but six feet wide, and seven and a half feet high, with a two-foot gauge and an overhead trolley for electric operation. Yet it has sixty-two miles of tunnels, seven hundred and thirty-four crossings, two hundred and sixty-six telephone connections, sixty-three electric pumps. It passes under the Chicago River eleven times and has an average of three hundred train movements each day. Being forty feet below the surface it runs under the skyscrapers, connecting with their delivery departments and the railroad depots, and transacting a freight business with silence and efficiency. Located in a cold clay stratum, the average temperature even in summer is fifty-five degrees, and a considerable sum is earned by selling the cool air to theaters and other public buildings. It is entirely owned by a stock company and no passengers are carried. Accidents are rare.

George Parke.

The Count of Ten

By JACK CASEY



"Come out and take
your lickin'!"

*If Eddie Londos had been as
good as he was game, he'd
have been champion; but
he knew he didn't have
the stuff to win, even
in the fight that was
more to him than
life itself*

A WISE-CRACKER in Barney's place in Spring Street had pulled another nifty. He had just called dapper little Eddie Londos the Count of Ten.

The crack halted a dozen punching bags and prompted twelve perspiring and aspiring to-be champions to look doorward and grin as Eddie stepped in. Eddie mistook the grins for a friendly welcome and waved gallantly.

He was unaware that he had just been christened. In fact if you had asked him Eddie would have told you he had been christened twenty-four years before, christened Edward Lawrence Londos, and that his brother Willie, aged ten at the time, had acted as godfather. Eddie then, in the eyes of his mother, was a prospective presi-

dent or priest. Fate, with scant respect for a mother's hopes, ruled him off both tracks and made him a pug and a poor pug at that.

In seven years of fighting in Los Angeles rings under various pseudonyms, Eddie Londos had been knocked out so often that he had lost track of the count. Referees who had tolled ten above his prostrate figure had come and gone and still Eddie Londos fought on.

He was a preliminary boy, fighting in the four and six-round matches that precede the main bout on a fight card. Ordinarily a pugilist fighting preliminaries is either a youngster going up the line or a veteran coming back, and seldom do they stay in the ranks more than a year or two. The embryo

passes on to bigger fields and purses, the veteran, punch-crazed and often goofy, finally fades from the picture.

Eddie Londos neither went up nor faded out. He kept on fighting. Fight fans, finding little else in him to cheer, cheered his gameness. And Eddie *was* game. He fought until he fell. Then if he could crawl to his feet he fought some more. There was something magnificent in the sheer doggedness of Eddie's perseverance. He never seemed to grow discouraged. Always trying, he grinned a blood-smear of a grin and threw punches until he went down and stayed down.

Along Cauliflower Row in Spring Street, where every loft building houses a fight gym, Eddie Londos was known as a set-up. Any good boy, they said, could take him. In fact most of them had. Sometimes they told him that they didn't need a good boy for the job, that a bum could do. They called him palooka meat, insulted him even further in the hope of starting something, but Eddie never replied. He simply grinned and let it go at that.

When Cauliflower Row, exasperated at failure, grew too harsh or abusive, Eddie trickled out and went on his way. Then from the top of the stairs they'd call him "yellow" and a "dude," discounting his gameness in the ring and accentuating his taste in raiment. This in a sense was a victory for Eddie, for unbeknownst to the Row, Eddie went two flights up for his clothes and never paid more for a suit than twenty-five dollars.

They were snappy suits, tailored to fit, but they needed one touch which Eddie supplied. He ripped out the label of the cut-rate outfit, substituting the label of Hollywood's most exclusive tailor. As the clothes, once on Eddie, looked as if they had been tailored by the gentleman whose label they bore, Spring Street took it for granted they were and resented Eddie's

supposed exclusiveness. It was this resentment on top of Eddie's latest defeat that brought him his new monicker.

HE had entered Barney's place mistaking the laughs for a greeting, only to have "Slaughterhouse" Ryan, a much battered heavyweight, step to his side and take the stance of a fight club announcer. The pug, throwing one paw over Eddie's shoulders, raised the other in the air and yelled:

"Gents, allow me to present the latest sensation in unconsciousville—Eddie Londos, better known as de Count o' Ten."

Came ribald applause, guffaws and handclaps.

"T'ree cheers for de count," yelled Sammy Mason, but instead of cheering he made raucous sounds known in the Row as "the birdie." The gym roared.

I was standing with Barney, had come in a moment before to pick up notes for a boxing column I run in the Sunday Sports page called "Picking the Queensberries." Barney was chortling, "A smart crack that, what I mean. Dude kid, always gettin' goaled. Print it; it's a nifty."

He nudged me, but I made no reply. I was looking at Eddie Londos. And strangely enough Eddie Londos was looking at me. He was, after a fashion, still smiling, only he wasn't. There was a smile on his lips, but none in his eyes.

In his eye was the look I had once seen in the eyes of a man sitting in a death cell hoping for a reprieve; a look in which was mingled bitterness, fear and despair.

I mumbled something to Barney and started out. Eddie passed out of the door before me. The crowd was still laughing, coarse laughter which suddenly went dim as I closed the door. On the stairs Eddie Londos, now white, wheeled suddenly upon me as I

was about to pass and, grasping my arm and pushing his face close to mine, said:

"Print that crack they pulled up there and—"

"And what?" I said, trying to appear calm.

"I'll kill you," he said.

We hadn't stopped walking; went plomping down the dirty wooden stairs a step at a time. Somebody opened the street door, three flights below and the roar of Spring Street rushed in, then faded as the door went shut. Eddie jerked me to a stop. The noise of the door made harsh echoes which seemed long in dying, then died so suddenly seemed louder.

I looked at Eddie and swallowed. Then I flared up. Shaking his hand loose I pushed him from me. "You got a heluva nerve, a punk like you," I said, "threatening me. Where do you get that stuff? I'll print what I damn please, see?"

I pushed my face resolutely toward his, knotting my fists. I expected he'd swing and that presently we'd be tumbling down the stairs in each other's arms. Instead, he looked at me with the look of a child unexpectedly slapped, and backed away.

"You're right," he said. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have cracked that way. I guess I was—er-r-r—upset, it was so unexpected, that crack upstairs. Right away when I saw you I pictured it in the papers just as Slaughterhouse pulled it. I—I guess I lost my head at the thought of it. You know—it's bein' in the papers." His hands folded and unfolded, and he somehow seemed to sag.

"I'm only a punk, I know," he continued, shaking his head, "just a ham-an-egger, but—but—" He came forward with his hands out. "If you only just keep that crack outa the paper, Mister Doyle, you know just forget it, it would—would mean more to me than anything I know of in life. In fact, Mister Doyle, it mustn't go in

the paper, it just can't go in the paper, what I mean, see?"

He was crying, crying unashamedly, as he had me by both arms looking up into my face.

"It ain't me," he added. "I ain't askin' it for me. It's—well—it's somebody else, what I mean, see?"

I saw. We shook hands and he blew his nose and flecked away two tears which rested glistening on his cheeks. Silent, we walked down the stairs. Of course it was a girl, and he, poor sap, was nuts enough to cry over her. She must never know that to Spring Street he was such a dude palooka they derisively dubbed him the Count of Ten. Else, perhaps, *she* would kayo him also.

ON the sidewalk he thanked me again, started for a cut down Ford standing at the curb, then turned back.

"Maybe you knew him," he said, stepping before me.

"Him?" I said. "Who?"

He gulped. "My brother."

I shook my head. "I don't think so," I said.

"Willie Hennigan." He spoke the name softly.

"Willie Hennigan!" I almost shouted it. "Willie Hennigan—your brother?"

He nodded.

I grasped his arms. "Willie Hennigan," I said, "was the greatest lightweight this town ever saw."

"Sure." Eddie blew his nose. "Sure he was."

I was excited. "What became of him? Where is he?"

He choked up. "At San Fernando Veterans' Hospital. Almost dead. It was because of him I—er—"

"Didn't want me to publish that crack. As if I would! As if I'd ever cast a slur on anyone connected with Willie Hennigan. What a fighter he was!"

I almost choked myself, at memories

of him. And now almost gone. Willie Hennigan dying! What a fighter he had been, what a fighter. God! They don't turn 'em out, any more, like Willie Hennigan. There never were many like him. Born to the racket. Had everything, heart of a lion, and what a sock! Science? It was his middle name.

And then right in his prime he had disappeared. Vanished like a wisp of smoke. Now I recalled he had gone to war and that was the last we had heard of him. What a lousy racket the fight game was, when we could so easily forget fellows like Willie Hennigan. Imagine a palooka labelling Willie Hennigan's kid brother the Count of Ten with Willie Hennigan within earshot! He'd have gone through Barney's gym like a Rotarian through a clambake. It would have been a shambles. Heavyweights, middleweights, any kind of weights.

He'd have murdered 'em, strung 'em out. Made a necklace of stiffs. What had happened? What had the war done to him?

"Gassed," explained Eddie. "Got it with the Marines at Vimy Ridge. Got it bad, too."

The gas had made a lunger out of him. He had been one now for years, dying by inches; hadn't been outside the hospital in months; but game! Ah, there were few Willie Hennigans. So game that he came back, out for all time, and kept his plight a secret by resuming his real name of Londos. Wanted no help. He had buried the great boy that was Willie Hennigan, and as Willie Londos he would take the gaff as his Creator willed until the end.

"You won't know him, Mr. Doyle. He's just a shadow. Don't weigh seventy-five pounds."

It was unbelievable that the fighting machine that had once been Willie Hennigan had rusted to nothing.

"I'm going out there now," said

Eddie. His voice quavered: "I go out every day. Maybe you'd like to—"

WE went out in Eddie's funny Ford. It was thirty miles, but I'd have gone three hundred to see Willie Hennigan and walked three thousand if it would have saved his life. There was no conversation until we reached the State road and were in the quiet of the hills. Then Eddie Londos unbuttoned his soul and turned it inside out.

Eddie Londos had never wanted to fight; he wasn't a fighter and knew it. But he loved Willie, whose name of Hennigan had been a managerial gift in the days when a Gaelic moniker was an asset. Willie, in his prime just before the World War and a step away from a championship, had been Eddie's god. He lived Willie's triumphs; worshiped his very being. There was no one on earth to Eddie Londos like his big brother Willie.

Strangely enough, I sensed, Willie in turn lived Eddie's life. He planned that his kid brother was to be a greater fighter than even he had become. He would be greater because Willie would teach him to avoid the mistakes he had made in climbing from ten dollar curtain-raisers to one thousand dollar guarantees.

He taught Eddie to spar, and Eddie hated it but wouldn't tell Willie. He pretended enthusiasm for the career his big brother outlined and tried not to be sick when Willie took him to bouts, and one or two were so one-sided the beaten man bled and reeled and sometimes vomited from blows to the body. At these times black specks would swim before Eddie's blurred eyes, and the pit of his own stomach would be flooded with nausea.

Just before Willie went to war, Eddie had his tenth birthday and received his first communion. Willie had received this sacrament of his faith nine years before, when Eddie was a baby. Willie had been a shabby kid

then, had never known a new suit of clothes, and had gone to the altar in home-tailored pants and a simple blouse but a gorgeous bow tie made from the satin sash that had been part of his mother's wedding dress.

What Willie had missed at his first participation as a communicant he made sure that Eddie had at his. Eddie's suit was tailored, his shoes new and squeaky and he had a flat-crowned derby hat and gloves of white kid. Willie's gift in commemoration of the event was a gold watch. Eddie drew it forth as we drove through a vast acreage of vineyards. Inside the back cover was engraved "From Willie to Eddie" and the date. That had been a great day, Eddie said.

I felt it had been a great day for Willie, for even then Willie had started to live Eddie's life. What blessings the older brother had missed through a faithless father and an impoverished mother who succumbed early to her lot, Willie had secured with his fists and enjoyed vicariously by showering them upon Eddie. Their mother had been dead two years when Willie went to war. Eddie was in a boarding school in Sonora Town, and didn't know Willie was going until the night he appeared in uniform and said good-by.

"Be a good kid, Eddie," he had said, "and learn all you can. Dan is sending over my light punching bag and gloves and my skip rope. Use 'em every day, kid, and watch your footwork. Work hard and when I come back I'll make you the best little fighter that ever pulled on a glove."

"Then he hugged me," Eddie told me, "and went away. He was crying and so was I, but gee, wasn't I proud of him! Father Hererra had stopped to talk with him in the school yard just before he took me off to one side to say good-by, and I remember Willie saying, 'If a guy's business is fighting, father, he shouldn't welch when a real fight comes along, even though it may be his last one.'

"It was his last one," went on Eddie sadly. "He never had a glove on again. He came home on a stretcher, and aside from one spell when he seemed to improve and could sit up, he's been on his back ever since."

"**B**UT what happened after he returned?" I asked.

"Nothing for a while," said Eddie. "He had put money in the bank in my name in case anything happened to him. I had Father Hererra use it to get him the best doctors, and we bought everything we could think of to make him happy. But he was restless and kept eying me, feeling my muscles and telling me to hurry and fill out so I could climb through the ropes. 'I got a hundred fights under my belt,' he would keep saying, 'and I want you to fight 'em for me. And there's one bird you gotta take—Spider Webb.' Willie hated the Spider."

"Spider was the only bird Willie couldn't lick," I said, "that's probably why. The Spider was a good fighter then. He's pretty well shot now."

Eddie continued: "When I was sixteen Willie decided I was ready to start, but was never to say I was Willie Hennigan's brother or to tell anyone he was here in a hospital. It's been seven years since my first fight and Willie still thinks I'm going to be champion. He coaches me every day except when he's too weak, and when I fight and win and get mentioned he reads the papers about me. I have to fight under fake names to cover up the lickings, and so far he's never got wise. When I'm licked I pretend the fight was out o' town at some cross roads where the clubhouse is a shooting gallery and too small to crash the Los Angeles sport pages. Of course if I was a main eventer I couldn't get away with using different names, but bein' only in prelim's nobody gives a damn."

We left the State road and climbed a steep grade to the hospital.

Willie Hennigan was alone in a

small room. At my suggestion Eddie introduced me as a visiting fight manager from New York who planned to find a spot for Eddie in the East. My real identity I knew would flood Willie with memories of happier days and cause him needless anguish. I hoped he would not recognize me. He didn't. In fact he was very weak. His smile, though, when Eddie bent over him, was beautiful. His eyes lighted up and you could sense the fierce pride he felt in this kid brother. He couldn't talk above a hoarse whisper. "New York's the spot, kid," he said. "You'll make good, too; you got everything. But before you go, kid—I don't think I'll be here when you come back—I'd like you to—" He choked for breath and coughed.

"What?" I asked gently, leaning over him.

"One more fight here," he said. "Get him, Spider Webb, before Eddie goes East and"—his voice was a whisper—"I go West."

"I'll get him," I said huskily. "I got a spot for him right now."

His eyes lighted up.

"Friday night at the Olympia," I said.

He pressed my hand with his shrunken one. I blinked a tear away and abruptly quit the room. "G'by, Willie," I said. "I'll wait for Eddie out here."

Eddie was wiping his eyes when he joined me fifteen minutes later. "What the hell was the idea o' pullin' that Spider Webb thing?" he asked bitterly. "You must 'a' knowed that would excite him. Cripes, he's been tryin' to tell me how to fight him, what his style is an' how dirty he battles. He really thinks I'm goin' to fight him."

"Well, you are," I said. "I'll fix it with Roy Brown the minute we get back to town. Roy Brown was the greatest admirer Willie ever had. He was matchmaker when Willie fought all his great fights at the old Auditorium. I'll not only get him to put you

on with Webb Friday night, but we'll put a radio in Willie's room so he'll get the fight blow by blow."

"And break his heart," said Eddie bitterly, "when Webb knocks me out."

"Don't be silly," I replied, "we'll give Webb your end of the purse to take a dive."

IN town I left Eddie and going to the Olympic Club got hold of Roy Brown, who had been a matchmaker when Willie was at his peak. I told him the story of Willie and Eddie and of the match I had promised with Webb.

Brown was astonished. He kept repeating over and over, "Willie alive—Willie Hennigan alive. Why," he said, "everyone thought he was killed in the war." He turned away in silence and looked fixedly at a photograph of Willie among a hundred others on his office wall—the great Willie Hennigan in fight togs.

"Sure I'll arrange the match for you," he said finally and it sounded, wistfully. "I loved Willie Hennigan. He was the manliest fighter I ever knew and the gamest. He never got a break in life so far as I know." He paused. "Do you know why he hated Webb?"

"Sure," I replied; "Webb was the only bird he couldn't lick."

Brown laughed bitterly. "Hell," he said, "I thought you were smarter than that. The day never dawned in Willie's prime that he couldn't lick six Webbs. No, the story is this, and it is a story, also another one Willie took on the chin from life:

"Down in Sonora Town Webb wronged a girl Willie was in love with; a beauty, half Spanish, half Mex'. Willie made Webb marry her and threatened to kill him if he didn't treat her white. The story never got out, but news that Willie and Webb were bitter enemies did. Figuring the thing a feud and a natural as a boxing attraction, managers matched them

up. While Willie hated Webb and could stop him every day in the week, out of respect for the girl he carried him. Every fight. Refused to lick him. But Webb tried hard to lick Hennigan, and that made it look good. They were matched and rematched, fought about six times, I think. I knew the story of the marriage, got it from Father Hererra, a Mex' priest, and one day I asked Willie why he didn't sock Webb proper and put him away. 'Why make her feel bad,' he said."

"So that was it," I said, kicking myself for a dumb-bell.

"Part of it," said Roy. "The rest I can surmise. There was a baby born, of course. Well, both she and the baby died of neglect after Willie left for the war. No doubt that's the first thing he learned when he returned half dead himself. He wanted revenge; but the only way he had of getting it was by making the kid brother a fighter. And with typical Hennigan luck, the kid's a lousy fighter."

It seemed unbelievable. It was a shocking thing.

"We got to do something," I said finally.

"We're going to," said Roy Brown finally. "Webb'll dive if I have to knock him down with a ring post. I'd do a hell of a lot more than that for Willie Hennigan."

IT was only four days to the fight. To make Willie Hennigan as happy as possible I faked a training grind for Eddie; had him don running trunks at the foot of the hill and gallop to the big gate behind the flivver. He reached Willie's room each afternoon dripping perspiration and looking "in the pink."

I had a male nurse sponge him off, then give him a salt and alcohol rub, after which he lounged, cooling off. They were happy visits for Willie Hennigan. The smell of sweat, the odor of liniment! They brought back memories of his great days. Then the

sight of the boy glowing with health—how he loved that kid brother! He devoured with his eyes the rippling muscles, the lithe movements, the silken sheen of skin over hard, firm flesh. "God," his eyes seemed to say, "if I only had that body!"

"You'll kill Webb," he'd say huskily.

"He'll stop him inside five rounds," I prophesied. "Won't you, kid?"

Eddie would flush and nod, flustered.

"It don't seem right to fool Willie," he said to me after every visit. "If I could only lick this guy on the level!"

We said good-by to Willie at six o'clock Friday evening. I was leaving the room as Eddie knelt and held Willie in his arms. "I feel as if it's good-by, Eddie," I heard Willie say. "The doc says I'm through. The last round, kid. But if you beat him I'll go happy. I'll be here by the radio with Roy Brown, Eddie; that is, what's left of me will be. All that I used to be will be with you in the ring helping you batter that human louse. Fight hard, kid, and clean and—" he coughed. "When I see Ma up there I'll tell her, kid, I'll tell her."

I fled. And I was crying, too.

Five minutes later, when Eddie Londos joined me, he said:

"The minute we get to the club, tell Roy Brown this fight is on the level."

WE had a dressing room under the stadium and were first to start for the ring. I had a couple of hoodlum hangers-on for seconds. The bout wasn't important from a fan's viewpoint; just one of a so-called all-star card of four ten-rounders. It was important only to poor Willie Hennigan. Brown had already gone to the hospital with a radio set to sit with Willie.

"For God's sake," Eddie had told him, "if this snake goals me pretend you have lost the connection or something, or Willie will be heartbroken."

"I'll make him lay down if you say so," Brown had replied.

"No." Thé kid was game: "I gotta lick him. If I can't, I'll take my beatin' and go out tryin'. God knows I owe that much to Willie."

"Then good luck," and Brown had left.

We walked toward the ring, passing Webb's dressing room. Eddie turned back and thumped on the door. "Come out and take your licking, you snake," he yelled.

The heads of Webb and three seconds popped out in amazement.

"Wotcha say?"

"I says come out and take your lickin'." Eddie had wheeled and now moved to the open door. He tapped Webb on the chest. "I'm Willie Hennigan's brother!" He said it softly. "The day never dawned that Willie couldn't lick you. Now he's laid up, almost dead, so I'm goin' to do it for him."

"Laid up!—Almost dead!" Webb turned white. "Say, wot kind o' hop are you smokin'? Willie Hennigan was knocked off in the war."

"No, he wasn't," I said. "He was gassed and he's dying right this minute in the Veterans' Hospital at San Fernando."

"If he wasn't," said Eddie, "he'd be right here now cuttin' your lousy throat for what you did to Mary Rose."

Webb was speechless, actually shaking, as if he had met a ghost.

We continued our march to the ring.

Ten minutes later, even before the bell rang, the fans were on their feet, the club was a bedlam, and the radio announcer at the ringside, just a step from our corner, was shouting into his boxed-in mike:

"The two men got into an altercation in the middle of the ring and before referee or seconds could interfere young Londos smashed the veteran Webb in the mouth, splitting his

lips and bringing blood. The referee threatened to disqualify the kid, but as Webb hit back and also cursed he waved the men to their corners and we are almost ready for the bell. The crowd is still in an uproar and yelling for the battle to begin. It is understood that Webb made an insulting remark about young Londos's sick brother which precipitated the attack.

"It looks as if it will be a great fight— There goes the bell!"

I thought of the words leaving the air in the bedroom of Willie Hennigan. What a message to that dying boy. Then I came to kick away the stool and pushed Eddie to battle. He went forward in a rush. Webb met him in the middle of the ring. Fists reached home in a flurry of blows.

Before I or my seconds had got into a crouch below our corner, Eddie had been beaten to the floor by two well-timed blows that were accurate and hard. He was hurt, but not out. He took a count of eight, then, covering, got up.

Smiling and licking cauterized lips, the Spider was on him. He lashed out. *Smack! Smack!* One, two. A gash on the right cheek, another on the left. The blows jarred the kid to his heels. Blood spurted from the cuts.

Webb grinned. Then again—one, two! On both of the kid's temples blue welts came to life. *Smack!* and blood spurted from a deep gash under the left eye. It swelled rapidly and soon would close. *Smack! Smack!* A heavy blow to the ribs, another to the heart. Eddie doubled up, his face contorted in pain.

"So you're Hennigan's brother, eh!" Webb was cruel in his triumph. He straightened the kid with a wicked uppercut which almost lifted him from the floor.

Eddie Londos shuffled backward, the Spider grinning and shuffling after him. He trapped him in a corner and was cutting him at will when the bell rang.

It was manslaughter. In the entire round Eddie Londos had not landed a solid blow and into the mike the radio announcer had poured a story in staccato sentences, each with a barb that would stab pain into Willie Hennigan's dying flesh.

I was mad. "You poor sap," I yelled into the kid's chopped-up face as we worked over him in the corner. "You get out there and fight! Stop taking them on the chin. Fight! Rush this has-been off his feet! Keep rushing him—keep him off balance. Fight him!"

"Keep swinging at him till you drop. Throw everything you've got. Do you hear? You got to do it, kid. Willie's listening to you, hear? Willie's listening and he's dying. He won't live the night. This'll kill him. Fight! Do you hear? *Fight!*"

The bell rang and I pushed him out. He went out crying. "At him," I yelled. "Tear him apart! Knock that stupid grin off his face!"

EDDIE went at Webb in a whirlwind of action. Stop him? He was like an explosive. He threw fists from all directions. Webb, puzzled, covered up. The kid aimed one high, Webb lifted his guard, and *sock!* Eddie crashed into his belt line. Webb grunted, hurt, and covered up again. Eddie came up with a beautiful uppercut and Webb staggered back, then bent forward to hold on. He was hurt; hurt badly.

Eddie side-stepped and let fly a right cross. It was perfectly timed. Webb went down, but was up in a second. *Sock!*

The kid sent home another, and Webb was glassy-eyed and befogged. The crowd was on its feet, the stadium in a roar. This wasn't Eddie Londos fighting. This was the Willie Hennigan of yore.

Suddenly. Webb reached forward and held on for dear life. Eddie had tired and missed a fierce blow. I re-

called the words of Willie: "What's left of me will be here, but all that I used to be will be in the ring helping you batter that human louse." The referee was trying to tear them apart. The kid was covered with Webb's blood and anxious to sock. The crowd was yelling for a knockout.

Webb twisted and turned, but held grimly on.

By the mike the announcer was yelling himself hoarse. Suddenly the referee got Webb free and Eddie stepped back. Webb's knees were still shaky, his body sheer jello. Eddie lunged forward and the impact was a crash.

Webb sank against the ropes, then bounded slowly back.

They were near our corner directly over the mike.

I was yelling like a madman, confused at the change. Here was Eddie Londos, the punk of them all, set for a kill when but a round before he had been chopped to ground meat. A tiger he seemed now, yet cool for a kill. As Webb rode toward him by the spring of the ropes, he side-stepped the outstretched hands and sent home a left. It was to Webb's belly and he bent forward head down. With the swiftness of light the kid came back with an uppercut which lifted Webb half through the ropes, then a step forward and Eddie Londos delivered a right to the chin and the Spider shot through the ropes.

He was out, cold as a fish.

His body seemed to hang in the air a second; there were warning shouts below, but before anyone could get clear Webb shot down. There was a crash heard above the roar of the crowd; the crash of furniture, the tearing of wood, followed by the thud of two bodies. I leaped up and around. Webb was out cold, bloody body stretched grotesquely like a drunk's, and beneath him was the radio announcer, knocked away from his mike, and likewise unconscious.

The place was a madhouse. Only the referee seemed calm, and Webb's seconds, who rushed to his side and pushed him into the ring. They held ammonia to his nose and doused him with water, but he was too far gone.

"Eight," I heard, then "Nine," and then "Ten."

Eddie Londos's hand was pulled up and I jumped into the ring.

"What happened?" he gasped as I led him to his corner where below men were bent over the still unconscious announcer.

"You won, you won, kid— You fought like a fool."

I slapped his face. He blinked his eyes. "I what?" he said.

"You won by a knockout, second round."

He gasped, then smiled and pressed my hand. "Willie," he said— "won't Willie be glad?"

Then I thought of the mike. Nobody had given the verdict. I hustled Eddie out of the ring. "Here," I told him, "Willie don't know it yet. This guy

was kayoed too. Tell Willie. Lean into it." I pointed to the mike in its cigar-box-like hood.

There was a sob in his voice as he leaned forward and talked. "I did it, Willie, I did it. I knocked him out in the second round."

Then, as if leaving a phone, Eddie Londos said to his brother, "Good-by, Willie."

Twenty minutes later I was talking to Roy Brown, over the phone. He was crying. So was I.

"Willie's gone, kid," Roy said. "Went out of his head and fought the whole second round. Then he suddenly came to. Then next thing Eddie is talking and telling he won. He just lay back, white and weak, but smiling. Gee, kid, it was sad but honest—it was beautiful. Eddie says, 'Good-by, Willie,' and just like they're together, he says, 'Good-by,' too, and—hell, I'm crying—he just, well, he just died."

I heard him click off and sat there numbly trying to figure it out.

THE END.



First Real American Flag

THE first one hundred per cent American flag was raised over the National Capitol in 1866!

Until the close of the Civil War all our bunting flags were made from foreign material. American bunting had been made as early as 1838, at Saxonville, Massachusetts, but it was not of suitable quality for flag-making. Every effort had been made to substitute a domestic texture for the English bunting used, but the home product did not prove capable of resisting the wind and air.

In 1865 Congress put a duty of forty per cent on bunting, and in the same year authorized the purchase of the domestic fabric for the navy in place of the foreign product. Encouraged by the protection that had been placed upon this textile, its manufacture was begun by General B. F. Butler and his associates at Lowell, Massachusetts, under the corporate name of the United States Bunting Company. On February 24, 1866, the first Stars and Stripes made of American bunting was hoisted over the Capitol at Washington.

Emery L. Salomon.



"This fight's goin' to be fair!" the man roared

Man-Hunt

Never had the vicious outlaw country of Arizona seen such a hurricane of retribution as struck when Funstall and Summers rode the vengeance trail

By CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

Author of "The Raider," "Mystery Land," etc.

LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

NED FUNSTALL, wild and reckless cowboy, rides up to a cabin just as Ben Lavercrombe strikes and kills his wife Emily. There is a gun duel, in which Ned kills Ben, then he rides south, seeking the woman's relatives, in Pardo, Arizona.

Ned's old friend, Webb Summers, finds the bodies, and circumstances make him think Ned must have struck the woman. Unable to believe it, he rides on Ned's trail to question him.

In Pardo he hears Ned has been there. He rescues Laura Bainter from the advances of Judge Lavercrombe, Ben's father, and she tells him of Funstall's supposed death at the judge's hands. Lavercrombe and the Loaza gang are after a hidden gold mine of Laura's dead father, but Clay Meeder, a suitor whom Laura does not love, protects her from them.

Summers and a strange rider beat off an attack of the Loaza gang; the

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for April 20.

stranger turns out to be Funstall! It was a man who stole Ned's clothes whom the judge had shot. But when Webb questions Funstall about the killing of Ben and Emily, Funstall is enraged that his pal should think it possible he had struck the woman, and stubbornly refuses to clear himself. Webb sees Laura kiss Clay Meeder—and does not know it is because, after confessing her love for Summers, she has got Clay's promise not to fight Summers.

Disillusioned, Summers rides off into the Apache country. He beats off an attack, but is wounded. In his weakened condition he is found by Lavercrombe and the gang. They take from him the diagram of Laura's mine, though he has managed to chew the paper somewhat; then Lavercrombe beats him and leaves him for dead. They ride off, and abduct Laura, taking her to their hidden valley to make her complete the map.

Summers is found by a girl of Pardo, Juanita, whom he had casually befriended; and she gets word to Funstall. Ned gets a doctor, then rounds up Meeder's gang to go after Laura and Lavercrombe.

Laura's crippled brother, Jerry, has trailed the gang, and helps Laura to escape with him on two stolen horses. But they are pursued, and as they near the Bainter Valley, Laura's horse is failing rapidly.

CHAPTER XXX.

DESERTED!

LAURA was about halfway down the slope when Jerry reached the bottom. She saw him bring his horse to a halt and slide out of the saddle. His left arm and leg were of little use to him, but in spite of the handicap he moved with surprising agility. She observed that his face was distorted with rage, and that his cheeks were pale and his eyes flaming.

So, without looking around she knew it was Lavercrombe who was descending the slope behind her.

She saw Jerry hopping around. Apparently he was searching for something. A rock. Just as her horse reached the level at the bottom of the slope Jerry crouched, stone in hand.

Then several things seemed to happen at once.

Lavercrombe was dismounting, and for an instant he had his back to Jerry, though he was looking over the back of his horse at Laura. He seemed to ignore Jerry entirely. His face was bloated with rage and his eyes were glittering. The long race had aroused him, and Laura knew she might expect the treatment that any brute devoid of his reason might accord her.

Jerry threw the rock with all his force. The missile was of a size that would comfortably fit in the palm of a man's hand, and Jerry had hurled it with all his strength. He had aimed at Lavercrombe's head, but the rock hit him between the shoulder blades near the base of the neck.

Lavercrombe's knees doubled under him and he dropped. But he was up instantly, his face white with fury.

Laura screamed, but Lavercrombe paid no attention to her. She saw his right hand sweep his right hip in search of a gun. But in his haste he had not got his gun, and being unable to shoot the boy he leaped at him with clenched hands.

What happened to Jerry, Laura did not know, did not see. For she was hurriedly dismounting, and her back was toward both Jerry and Lavercrombe. When she turned and started to run toward them, Jerry was stretched out on the ground, lax and motionless, while Lavercrombe was coming toward her, his arms outstretched to grasp her, his face bestial with the terrible passion that had gripped him.

She tried to slip past him to reach Jerry. But with amazing swiftness he

sprang in front of her, seized her with his big hands, and crushed her to him so tightly that the breath was driven from her body.

Then, swinging her under one of his huge arms he carried her to his horse. Still holding her, in spite of her struggles, he cut a piece of rope from the coil on the saddle ring. Without speaking he placed her on the ground, knelt over her, viciously gripped her hands, brought them together and tied them with the rope.

She caught a glimpse of his eyes as he lifted her, and she was certain that all reason had fled from them. She fought him, still thinking of Jerry, but she was helpless.

He threw her into the saddle with a ferocity that terrified her, and instantly lashed her feet into the stirrups.

Then he growled: "Now see if you can get away, damn you!"

He stood for an instant looking at her, and she knew that he had not lost his reason, but was laboring under mighty passions that would yield to any form of violence that his tortured brain should happen to devise. He was vacillating, uncertain, and he looked at her as if seeking provocation for his meditated brutality.

But there was something else in his attitude. He was in a white fury, and yet his eyes had a strained, haunted expression, as though his great rage was tempered by apprehension, by dread, by an eagerness to put distance between himself and something that he had seen or heard.

HE stood there only briefly. Then he ran to his own horse, leaped into the saddle, rode back and seized the bridle rein of Laura's horse, and fled eastward, his horse running heavily, dragging the led animal after him.

Laura watched Jerry as long as she could see him. He was still stretched out on the ground, motionless. Then a turn in the trail shut him from view.

Lavercrombe was now visibly excited. He had got out his quirt. Now and then he lashed his animal with it. He jerked at the reins of Laura's horse, trying to make it increase its speed. But the horse seemed to be in a perverse mood and kept pulling back as though reluctant to follow.

Lavercrombe cursed the animal. He drove his spurs into the flanks of his own horse with little effect. He kept looking back, but not at Laura. His gaze appeared to seek the crest of the slope at the point where he had begun his descent to the valley, and at such times the fear in his eyes was evident.

He rode straight down the valley recklessly. When he reached the slope that led upward to the desert country which stretched from the end of the valley to Pardo, he slid out of the saddle and ran beside the horse, lashing it with his quirt. He dropped back and lashed Laura's horse also, and cursed it bitterly for pulling back.

When they reached the crest of the slope he was panting heavily, and his eyes held a wild glare. His hands were shaking. Twice he tried to mount and failed. The third time he got up by throwing himself across the saddle and squirming around until he got into the seat. Then, urging his horse with voice and whip and spurs, he rode into the desert stretch.

It was heavy work for Judge Lavercrombe's horse, for Laura's animal still held back, and never gave Lavercrombe a loose rein.

Lavercrombe was still glancing fearfully over the back trail, and Laura began to wonder about the rider she had seen following Lavercrombe across the valley away back there where she and Jerry had entered the timber. The second rider had appeared to be riding faster than Lavercrombe, but of course he had not maintained that pace or he would have caught up by this time. Perhaps, whoever he was, he had found Jerry.

If he was a member of the outlaw

band he would not bother with the boy, of course, for he would be intent upon catching up with his chief. But if he were a member of Lavercrombe's band, why should Lavercrombe betray fear in his backward glances?

Hope stirred within her. She had seen no body of riders near the outlaw cache or anywhere in the country she and Jerry had traversed to reach the head of the slope above Baipster Valley, but of course there was a chance that Meeder and his outfit, and Funstall, had got back from their quest for the Indians who had attacked Summers.

The sun was high when they came in sight of Pardo, and when they reached the edge of town Laura was amazed to discover that the town appeared to be deserted. Only one man was visible as Lavercrombe, now cursing steadily in a curious undertone, urged his horse down the street.

The man she saw was evidently a bartender in one of the saloons, for he stood in a saloon doorway with his arms folded over his chest, watching Lavercrombe and herself with a wry, derisive smile. He said nothing, however. He seemed almost apathetic toward the curious spectacle of a woman, obviously a captive, being dragged down the street by a cursing madman.

She felt it strange that the man said nothing. She even felt sufficiently detached to be amazed that there were no other men or women visible. But she had little time to wonder about these things, for presently she was in front of Lavercrombe's house, and Lavercrombe was dismounting.

He ran heavily to the door, unfastened it and threw it open. Then he returned and removed the ropes that lashed her feet to the stirrups.

LAVERCROMBE said nothing to her. His eyes had a vacant stare and his muttered words were unintelligible.

Whatever the malady that had

seized him, it had reddened his face and sapped his strength, for as he lifted her from the saddle and moved with her toward the house she felt him stagger and tremble.

He carried her through the door, slammed the door after him by kicking it with a heel, carried her through the big front room to a bedroom and threw her upon a bed.

Then with the ropes that he had used in lashing her feet to the stirrups he now tied her ankles together.

Stepping back to the door of the bedroom he looked at her. She saw that the color had drained from his face, leaving it chalk white, and that his eyes had taken on a furtive, cunning gleam.

He left her. She could hear him running about the house. Evidently he was searching for something. She heard him pulling and slamming at various drawers here and there, opening doors and violently closing them, overturning chairs that were in his way.

There was a clatter of tinware, a crashing of dishes. In his search for whatever he was hunting he had evidently overturned everything in the kitchen.

She heard him coming back. He was raging.

He loomed in the bedroom door and stared at her. His voice was dry and hollow.

"All gone," he said. "Every damned gun in the place. Rifles—everything."

He placed both of his hands against the door-jambs as if to steady himself.

"I lost mine," he added, "at the hideout. Didn't have time to pick them up. He'll kill me, sure as hell! He's coming!"

"Who?" she asked, quickly, eagerly. "Who is coming?"

He stared at her as if amazed that she did not know.

"Funstall," he said.

He turned and ran through the big room to the front door.

She heard the door being opened; heard it slam.

She was thrilling with hope now. Her hands were tied behind her, and her ankles were lashed tightly together, but she managed to squirm and twist around until her legs were over the side of the bed. Then she sat up, stood erect and began to hop toward the front door.

She reached it, managed to get it open.

Then she hopped down the step to the ground in front of the house.

She saw Lavercrombe running down the middle of the street.

He ran only a little distance, then went into a house. He emerged empty-handed.

He was still trying to find a gun, she supposed. He crossed the street and went into another house.

And now Laura saw that something had happened to Pardo. Some of the buildings appeared to have been wrecked. The fronts of several saloons had been battered until there was nothing left of them except débris. Card tables with broken legs were strewn along the sidewalks. Faro outfits and roulette wheels were lying demolished, in doorways and in destroyed store fronts. Mattresses and broken parts of beds were hanging out of windows. Chairs, bureaus, tables, splintered and shattered, were everywhere. It seemed to Laura that a band of raging demons had pillaged the town.

She saw Lavercrombe come out of another house. He was still empty-handed. She stood watching him as he went into house after house and into saloon after saloon. He found no weapon in any of them.

He emerged from still another place, ran to the middle of the street and looked back at her. He started to run toward her, but changed his mind and ran in the opposite direction, toward

the man who still stood in the saloon door a little distance down the street.

CHAPTER XXXI.

GATHERING STORM.

THE wrath of Clay Meeder, accumulating as he rode at the head of his outfit in search of Laura, had partly expended itself in Pardo. When the Meeder outfit left town there was not a Loaza or a Lavercrombe man or woman remaining. They had gone out as rapidly as their horses and the various vehicles they had used could take them.

And all who went were vehement in their promises never to return.

There were a few who objected. These were carried a little distance out into the desert and some sand was carelessly thrown over them. And then the work of destruction was completed.

The Meeder outfit worked with whirlwind speed. They were searching for Laura Bainter and Jerry, and when they had finished with Pardo there was not a crack or a crevice, a room or a closet, an outbuilding or a shelter of any kind that had not been investigated or ripped open. Saloons known to belong to Lavercrombe or Loaza sympathizers or supporters were completely destroyed.

No liquor was drunk by the men of the Meeder outfit. Grim and sober, they struck and departed.

They rode westward again, following Meeder and Funstall.

For days they combed the country on both sides of Bainter Valley. They separated into units of twos and threes and spread out over the land, darting here and there into coverts and cañons and gorges, investigating everything, searching everywhere. Hills and ridges, grove and forest, received the intense scrutiny of men who were trained to the mysteries of woodcraft and trailing.

They grew gaunt and weary, but no horse or man was spared. And then one day, just at dusk, an eagle-eyed cowboy found a trail. He rode it until he was certain, and then he communicated his news to the others.

Funstall and Meeder were riding at the head of the outfit when they reached a wooded eminence above a narrow basin from where they could look through a gorge into another basin.

They saw the glimmer of a camp fire through a thicket, and knew that their quest was ended.

"That's them," said Meeder. "That's their hideout. I've heard they had one, somewhere, but I never was interested enough to try to find it."

The moon was bright, disclosing the slumberous country for miles around, and Funstall, his gaze sweeping the valley below him, observed two riders racing across the valley bottom toward the wooded mesa southward, several miles distant.

The two riders were not more than half a mile away, and the keen-eyed man who had discovered the trail now whispered:

"Sure as hell that last rider looks like a woman! An' they're burnin' the breeze!" The cowboy shaded his eyes with his hands, adding: "The first rider looks like a kid."

"It's Jerry," said Funstall. "They've got away!"

There was a concerted movement by men and horses. But Meeder halted it with a sharp command.

"Wait!" he said. "If they've got away it's all right with us. It gives us a chance to clean up without danger of hurtin' them. There's nobody movin' in the camp. There's no hurry now. We've got them."

He was giving directions to the grim-faced riders surrounding him, dividing them into units which were to strike from various points, when another rider burst from out of the shadows on the other side of the valley

and began to race after the two that had gone before.

The third rider was not more than two or three hundred feet distant when he entered the flood of moonlight that bathed the valley, and Funstall's voice rang out sharply:

"Lavercrombe!"

"He's yours," said Meeder, his voice snapping. "Go get him! We'll get the rest of them!"

FUNSTALL carefully eased his horse down the slope, and when he straightened for the run across the valley he turned his head and saw the rest of the outfit swarming down the slope behind him. Turning again when he was perhaps half a mile distant he saw no sign of men or horses. They had entered the gorge.

The two riders had vanished into the timber on the mesa while Funstall was still some distance away, but not more than a mile ahead of him was the third rider, Lavercrombe.

He was certain that Lavercrombe had not seen him, for not once did the man turn his head. He was leaning forward in the saddle, and his right arm was moving up and down frequently. He was applying the quirt, urging his horse to his best efforts in the hope of a quick capture.

Funstall had gained slightly, and when Lavercrombe's horse disappeared into the timber Funstall was not far from the bottom of the slope that led to the mesa top.

But when Funstall got into the timber he was forced to pull his horse down. Lavercrombe was a dim figure in the mist that floated lazily in the forest, and as he rode a zigzag course there were times when Funstall could not see him at all. Later, when the mist began to lift and daylight came he found that he had lost ground.

He managed to gain upon Lavercrombe in the next hour or so, and he was beginning to think that he might catch him before the race was many

minutes older. Then, in leaping a deadfall his horse caught a leg or a hoof and fell heavily.

Funstall went out of the saddle, but he landed among the branches of the deadfall and was not injured.

But the horse had broken a leg. Funstall had to shoot him.

He stood erect for an instant afterward, and scanned the back trail. No one was in sight, so he turned and began to run after Lavercrombe.

For a time Funstall kept Lavercrombe in sight, but after awhile he vanished.

After half an hour of running and walking Funstall reached the edge of the valley. He saw where fresh hoof tracks had cut the soil at the crest, and he slid down the slope to the valley floor, watching the sand at the base in order to follow the hoof-prints. At the foot of the slope he heard a voice calling his name, and he turned swiftly and saw Jerry.

Jerry was standing, but swayed limply. He was pale and a small stream of blood was coming from a corner of his mouth. In an instant Funstall was at his side, questioning him.

"He's got Laura," he told Funstall. "It's Lavercrombe. They had her hidden over yonder. I got her free and Lavercrombe followed us. There's my horse. Lavercrombe's gone toward Pardo."

But Funstall had already seen the animal and he ran to it and leaped into the saddle.

Pardo, of course, was where Lavercrombe would take her, ignorant of what had happened there. But Funstall feared that when he reached the town and found it thus deserted, he would go on into the wilderness that stretched to the east and the south. But he could not be more than half an hour ahead, and with Laura to hamper his speed that interval would be cut down greatly.

Funstall did not spare the horse, and

he rode lightly, easily, in spite of his half hour run in the forest.

Meeder had told him to "get" Lavercrombe, and, of course, Meeder meant that when and if he got within range of the man he was to shoot him. And Funstall had such an end in view for Lavercrombe, but before the end came he intended to punish the man for what he had done to Summers.

As he rode up the slope at the eastern end of the valley and struck the big sand level above it his thoughts were upon the bruised and battered figure that had met his gaze when Juanita had led him into the Perillo cabin. For several days he had been picturing his old friend, wounded and exhausted, being battered by Lavercrombe's big fists, and then, as now, Funstall's rage was like fire in his veins. He intended to kill Lavercrombe, all right—he would not disappoint Meeder there—but before that happened he would be sure to deal out the punishment he meditated.

WHEN he was halfway to Pardo he crossed a low bridge and found himself upon the level stretch that reached to the town. He was still about three or four miles distant, however, and he grimly scanned the country beyond Pardo for Lavercrombe and his captive. There was no moving thing on the big level, and so he knew that Lavercrombe had stopped in the town.

As he drew nearer he saw two horses standing in front of a building far down the street. There was nothing else in sight.

The horses were standing in front of Lavercrombe's house. As Funstall drew nearer to town he was able definitely to single out the building. And, knowing Lavercrombe, he sank the spurs into the flanks of the animal under him and forced him to greater speed.

And then he saw a man come out of Lavercrombe's house and run to

another house, which he entered. He presently emerged from that and entered another, only to repeat the action again and again. The man looked like Lavercrombe.

Now another figure appeared—a woman. She had seemed to hop from a doorway, and she stood, rigid and motionless, facing him.

The man continued to run from house to house. Now he was running straight down the middle of the street, the dust erupting at each step. He stopped in front of a building and seemed to talk to some one in a doorway, for he gesticulated in apparent great excitement, finally shaking a fist.

The man was Lavercrombe. Funstall was nearer now—not more than three or four hundred feet distant—and he was also able to see the face of the man at whom Lavercrombe had been making his excitable motions. The man was the bartender with whom Funstall had talked on the night he had come to Pardo to seek Lavercrombe.

Funstall rode to the first building at the western end of town and dismounted. He hitched his horse to a post, pulled his belt a notch tighter and walked toward Lavercrombe.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE TRAIL.

ALMOST two weeks had passed since Summers had been wounded, and for three or four days he had been impatient.

But Dr. Carson, staying on at the Perillo cabin because he had promised Funstall to do so, was not to be persuaded that his patient was well enough to leave.

"You may feel all right," he said, "and you've got a lot of your strength back, but you feel better than you really are, and if you undertook a long ride or overexerted yourself in any other way, you'd be likely to go flat on

your back again. And you would stay down longer than you did before."

Juanita and Carson had told Summers very little, though they had heard from Perillo that Laura and Jerry had disappeared and that Funstall and the Meeder outfit were after them. They had also been told by Perillo what had happened to Pardo, and they divined what would happen to the Lavercrombe and Loaza men should they chance to meet the furious riders that were searching for them.

So that Summers would not ask questions that would embarrass Juanita and Carson, they had kept Major in a miniature cañon where he could not be seen from the cabin.

But they could not keep Summers from talking or asking questions, or from studying their faces when the questions were being answered or evaded.

For the past few days Summers had been addicted to long silences, and this morning he was grave and taciturn. He had got out of his bunk at dawn, and that was where he was found by Carson and Juanita when they got up half an hour later.

Summers was sitting on the stump which Funstall had occupied when he had passed time oiling Major's saddle and bridle.

When Carson approached and greeted him he regarded the doctor with steady gaze.

"Doc," he said, "I reckon I must have been pretty sick."

"About as sick as a man could be without dying."

"Fever?"

"Plenty."

"I reckon you know about fevers, eh?"

"Well—something."

"A man goes out of his head, I reckon?"

"Sometimes. Often when a fever patient is in delirium people imagine he is suffering from hallucinations, when, as a matter of fact, his brain is

merely churning up incidents that might have occurred to him years before. Not knowing what the patient is talking about, people naturally think he is raving."

"You reckon he don't see things that ain't there?"

"He may dream, just as a well person may dream."

"Then, not knowin' he was dreamin', a man might have a hard time determinin' whether he was dreamin' or thinkin' about somethin' real that had happened to him. I reckon everything would seem like a dream."

"Possibly."

Summers sighed and gazed dejectedly downward.

"I was dreamin' then, I reckon, because that never happened before."

"What didn't happen?"

"That I was sick an' saw Funstall bendin' over me. That must have been a powerful dream, though, doc, for I felt Funstall's hands on my face. It seemed mighty real."

Carson did not answer, but he glanced quickly at Juanita, who was standing in the door of the cabin, listening.

SUMMERS looked up, smiling wryly.

"Shucks! It didn't happen, of course. We've not been so thick lately, an' he wouldn't bother, even if he knew."

He was silent for a minute or two, and then he gazed at Carson. His forehead was wrinkled thoughtfully.

"I expect you've seen a lot of things in your time, doc," he said, "enough to help you to understand why men do different things. Now, you take two boys. We'll say they had the same mother. One goes wrong from the start.

"He does things that ain't got any sense to them. He'll show crooked. He'll lie and steal. Maybe he'll do worse. Well, his brother won't do any of those things. He'll go straight

no matter what temptation is put in his way."

"That might result from environmental influence, or from heredity. One might trace such inclinations back half a dozen generations."

"But if a man didn't show such things until he'd grown up. Then what?"

"It's pretty hard to explain," said Carson. "There's several theories about it. But I have always thought that if a man grows up knowing the difference between right and wrong it's only his cussed meanness that makes him do things he hadn't ought to do."

"I reckon that sort of a man wouldn't be a steadfast friend, doc?"

"Hardly. He couldn't be depended upon. He might go straight for a long while and then he'd do some dog's trick that would make you ashamed of him."

Summers visibly winced. His face seemed to have paled a little. But his voice was steady.

"Suppose a man had always been a gentleman, especially with women. And then one day he'd beat a woman to death with his fists?"

"I should say that wouldn't be a gentlemanly thing to do," laughed Carson.

Summers's pallor appeared to deepen.

"You'd think there wouldn't be any excuse for that, eh?"

"None that I can think of."

"I reckon not. Losin' his temper wouldn't explain it. Goin' loco would explain it. But when he was met afterward he seemed the same, outwardly. Perfectly sane. He hadn't changed a bit. But he didn't seem to think that mentionin' an excuse was necessary. An' if you'd give him a chance to explain an' he wouldn't explain, could you be blamed for breakin' away from him?"

"I should think not. Even if he did explain, that wouldn't change things."

"No: I reckon not."

He suddenly seemed to have enough of the subject, for he added, looking at Juanita:

"Was I dreamin', or was Funstall here?"

It was the first time he had asked the question direct, and Juanita could not lie to him.

"He was herè the first two days."

Summers smiled at Carson.

"You made it pretty strong, doc. You see, that couldn't have been a dream—it was too real. He rode Major here."

"Why, how do you know that?" asked Carson. "Did you hear Funstall and Juanita talking about it?"

"Do you think my brain has stopped workin'? I've been piecin' things together. I'd been wonderin' how Major's bridle got to hangin' on that limb over there."

They looked, and there was the bridle. They had forgotten all about the bridle.

And now he smiled at them, with a gentleness that brought an ache to their throats. For the bridle had been hanging there for several days. He had known, and had patiently waited for them to tell him. He had endured suspense and anxiety, and they had lied to him.

"YOU see," he went on, his smile now wan and thin. "I knew that if Major's bridle was here it must have come on Major. An' now that you have told me that Funstall was here I know that Major's rider must have been Funstall. I reckon Major went to Bainter's after I had that brush with the Indians, an' Funstall rode over here, lookin' for me."

That was right, they told him. Only Funstall had not come to look for him. Juanita had gone to the Bainter cabin and had brought Funstall back. Then Juanita had taken Funstall back to the Bainter place and had led Major here so that he might be used when the patient got well.

"Laura an' Jerry are all right, I reckon," he said after an interval.

And now they knew it was no longer any use to lie to him, and they told him that Laura and Jerry had not been seen for a week, and it was supposed the Lavercrombe band had taken her away. But they added that the Meeder outfit and Funstall were after them.

"I expected that," he said. He told them about the diagram of the mine and how he had tried his best to chew it to render it useless to them.

"I was thinkin' about that when Lavercrombe was knockin' me around," he added. "They'd not be able to read the diagram an' they'd ride to the cabin an' make her talk. But I couldn't do anything, then. Now it's different."

He got up from the stump and walked to the tree, taking the bridle and placing it in the crook of his left arm. He went into the cabin and came out, strapping his cartridge and gun belt around his waist. He was a little thinner than formerly, but he looked sinewy and capable as he stood there for a time inspecting the big Colt.

"I'd be careful if I were you," warned Carson. "Any violent physical exertion will kill you."

"It won't be physical exertion this time, doc," he answered.

He slipped the huge gun into its holster and stood there, listening, for from a distance came the peculiar rushing, crashing sounds made by a horseman riding the aisles of a forest. And presently the horseman came into view. He crossed a swale, clattered up a slope and brought his horse to a sliding halt near the cabin. He was a tall, bronzed young man, and his left arm was limp. He grinned at Carson.

"Heard you was here, doc," he said. "Got my arm busted last night. Want you to fix her up." He looked at Summers and his smile broadened.

"We got them last night at their hideout. A proper clean-up. All but Lavercrombe. Laura Bainter an' Jerry

got away, with Lavercrombe after them. Funstall was trailin' them, aimin' to get Lavercrombe. Lavercrombe will bust for Pardo, likely—if Funstall don't ketch him. Meeder an' all the bunch that ain't hurt have cut across to Bainter Valley, followin' Lavercrombe. Fix me up as quick as you can, doc, an' I'll take you back to the rest of the cripples."

Juanita seemed to sense the inevitable, for she ran around the cabin and quickly reappeared, carrying Major's saddle. Then she ran ahead of Summers to the cañon where Major was concealed. And presently Major burst out of the timber near the cabin and crossed the clearing with prodigious bounds. Summers, tall and loose in the saddle, was riding as easily as when his health had been considerably better.

For an instant they were in sight on a wide sand level. Then the swirling, billowing dust swallowed them.

CARSON stood for a few minutes gazing at the place where Summers and his horse had disappeared, and then he turned to Juanita and the cowboy. He spoke to Juanita.

"There goes a man," he said. "You heard him talking about a man who had beaten a woman to death with his fists. He didn't let on, but the man who did that is Funstall. Funstall has been his friend, but he tried to pretend that there was no connection between the two. Summers has been worried. He likes Funstall. In his own mind he has been trying to find excuses for the man. So far he has found none, but he keeps on trying. He hates to give up. He's in agony over the situation. He doesn't believe Funstall is guilty. He has asked Funstall, and Funstall won't give him any satisfaction. I've listened to his ravings while the fever had him, and I know he came down here to take Funstall back with him, to turn him over to the authorities to be charged with murder. But he can't

take Funstall back with him. His friendship is the barrier that keeps him from it. He's in a bad spot. I'll be damned if I ain't sorry for him."

"I've heard of that," said the cowboy. "Summers is ridin' a tough trail. It's a great trail because there ain't one man in a thousand that would ride it. They wouldn't be great enough themselves. They'd shy off an' let Funstall go. They'd keep their hands off. But this guy Summers is different. He means to go through. If Funstall can show justification for that killin', Summers will stand with him. If he can't, Summers will take him back to justice in spite of hell an' high water. That's a great trail an' it takes a great man to ride it."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BARE FISTS.

RUNNING down the street, the dust scuffing up as he went, Lavercrombe stopped in front of a saloon. In the saloon door stood a man. He was the bartender Laura had seen when a few minutes before Lavercrombe had led her down the street to his house. It was the man with whom Funstall had talked when a week or so before he had ridden into town in search of Lavercrombe.

The bartender wore an apron which had once been white, but was now soiled and crumpled. The apron ran well up under his arms, and around it at the waist was strapped a cartridge felt studded with cartridges, and a gun belt that slanted down to a point below his right hip. Lying tight against the right thigh was a holster with the butt of a heavy revolver projecting from it.

The bartender had been watching Lavercrombe.

And now Lavercrombe turned and saw Funstall riding toward town. Funstall was only a little distance away, and Lavercrombe could see his face very distinctly.

Lavercrombe stepped toward the bartender.

"Give me that gun!" he ordered. His voice was almost a shriek.

"You come any closer an' I'll give you every damned slug that's in it!" threatened the bartender. "Stand out there like a man an' take what's comin' to you!"

Lavercrombe lunged forward. The huge gun appeared and was leveled at his stomach. Lavercrombe halted his forward lunge. He backed away, reached the middle of the street, glanced desperately up and down, as though seeking a place to hide from the vengeance that he knew was upon him, then turned and, with his legs spread apart, his chin on his chest and his hands clenched as if to keep his muscles from leaping with the terror that was tugging at them, he braced himself for Funstall's bullet.

Funstall had dismounted and was now within a dozen feet of Lavercrombe. And Funstall's gun was out and was held tightly against his right hip, its long barrel level and rigid, aimed at Lavercrombe's chest.

"Here you are, eh?" said Funstall.

He had seen Laura standing in front of the Lavercrombe house. He had seen Lavercrombe running from building to building for a weapon. His first glance at Lavercrombe had told him that Lavercrombe was unarmed.

He moved closer to Lavercrombe.

"You see what's happened here," he said. "You ain't got a friend here. By this time your gang is wiped out. Meeder's men have got them."

Funstall's voice was cold and steady. There was no hint of passion in it.

"I found Summers the other day," he went on. "Summers is my friend. You found him when he'd been shot. He wasn't able to defend himself. But that made no difference to you. You beat him up an' left him to die. I aim to do my best to square that with you, you sneakin' polecat."

Lavercrombe, his chin still on his

chest, every muscle of his body quivering in expectation of receiving the terrible missile that would presently be belched into him from the muzzle of Funstall's gun, was watching the weapon in a sort of stupefied fascination. His brain had ceased working, appalled and withered by the amazing fact that death was imminent and that he could do nothing to avert it.

And then, still further amazed, he saw that Funstall was unbuckling the cartridge belt.

FUNSTALL threw belt and holster and gun into the sand close to the front of the saloon. Instantly Lavercrombe lunged at him, striking savagely.

Anticipating the movement, Funstall stepped aside. Half turning, pivoting, he swung his right fist to Lavercrombe's jaw with terrific force. The blow was heard by Laura, far up the street. The bartender grinned widely.

Lavercrombe went down, unconscious. He fell, face down into the dust, his legs and arms twitching. Funstall stood, watching him.

"That one knocked some of the swell-headedness out of him, I betcha," said the bartender. His facial muscles twitched, betraying the intensity of his passions.

Presently Lavercrombe moved. Dizzily he raised his head and stared about him. His eyes were glazed and his neck muscles stood out like cords. His mouth had been smashed by the blow, and blood dripped from the macerated lips.

Lavercrombe began to get up, and Funstall waited.

Funstall's passions were visible now; the first blow had unleashed them, and there was cruelty in the lines of his lips and unrelenting determination in his alert eyes as he followed Lavercrombe's movements.

Lavercrombe slowly recovered from his daze, and his eyes blinked comprehendingly as at last his gaze centered

upon his implacable enemy. It seemed he knew that this fight was to be to a finish.

His macerated lips curved in contempt. He brushed a hand across the lips to wipe the blood away and silently rushed. The shock of the terrible blow Funstall had dealt him had sapped some of his great strength, but he had recuperated quickly, and his huge muscles were no longer quivering. He was bigger than Funstall and if he could close with him he could use his weight to advantage.

But Funstall avoided Lavercrombe's rush. Again he stepped aside, intending to repeat the blow that had once sent Lavercrombe down, but his right foot struck an obstruction in the deep dust and slowed his movement slightly.

Lavercrombe's huge fist thudded glancingly against his chin. Lights flickered in his vision; there was a ringing in his ears. He clinched with Lavercrombe to keep from falling, knowing that his enemy would not be as chivalrous as he.

Fiercely Lavercrombe tried to throw him off. Finding that impossible, he began to drive his fists into Funstall's sides and stomach.

The pain revived Funstall and he slipped away, circling so that Lavercrombe could not set himself for another blow.

Funstall had felt the terrific strength of Lavercrombe's muscles during the clinch, and he was aware that if he was to win this fight he would have to wear the man down slowly. So he now stepped lightly around Lavercrombe, jabbing his left fist into the other man's face incessantly, with force enough to keep him off balance.

The jabs, though not heavy enough to knock Lavercrombe off his feet, were visibly damaging to the man's face. For presently his eyes grew discolored and swollen and his lips began to drool blood again.

Jab, jab, jab. Lavercrombe's head went bobbing back on his shoulders with the pistonlike motion of Funstall's arm. He cursed furiously, and recklessly charged in, disdained the cruel jabbing that met his rush, swept Funstall's left arm aside with his clublike fist and landed a terrific smash with his right to Funstall's face.

Funstall wavered. His eyes glazed and he pitched forward on his face, breaking the fall with outstretched arm.

The man standing in the doorway of the saloon shook his head knowingly, and his face whitened a little. His sympathies were with Funstall, and when Lavercrombe leaped forward intending to kick his helpless adversary, the bartender drew his gun and called sharply:

"Kick him an' I'll blow hell out of you! This fight's goin' to be fair!"

Lavercrombe grinned with hideous mirth. He stepped over Funstall, hitching at his belt as he jeered at him. Funstall shook his head after the manner of a dog emerging from water after a dive. The bartender smiled again. Funstall was only slightly dazed. He was staying down until his head cleared.

LAVERCROMBE stood over Funstall, and the bartender ordered him back.

"Give him a chance to get up," he growled. "He gave you a chance, didn't he?"

Lavercrombe obeyed, and as he stepped back Funstall bounded to his feet and rushed. He jabbed again with his left—jabbed Lavercrombe off balance. Then his right landed with a crash and Lavercrombe reeled backward.

His knees buckled, he almost went down. But he stiffened to an erect position and met Funstall's rush with a heavy right to the stomach.

And now Lavercrombe no longer cursed his enemy. He seemed to re-

alize that if he wanted to win he must conserve his strength and his breath. For the lithe Funstall, warily circling him, was the younger man. Funstall's blows were coming with as much force and precision as when the first one had landed. Funstall's muscles were like leather. He exhibited no sign of weariness, and Lavercrombe's legs were beginning to weaken.

Funstall, it seemed, was merely jabbing in order to create an opening for heavier blows with his right hand. Frequently they came—ripping, tearing, thudding. One of them landed on Lavercrombe's cheek and split it open. Still another landed with deadening force on the bridge of his nose and seemed to break it. He was not certain, but two or three times he met Funstall's eyes and he guessed the awful truth, that Funstall was not striking as hard as he could strike, that he was deliberately prolonging the fight in order to inflict further punishment. Funstall was exacting vengeance, and the curiously cold and passionless demeanor he had worn when talking to Lavercrombe before he had removed his cartridge belt and gun, had lasted all through the fight.

And there was still no change in Funstall.

Lavercrombe landed some blows, but Funstall took them without a change of expression—with no expression at all. The only visible evidence of passion was in Funstall's eyes. He was thinking continually of Summers. He could see Summers in the hut, wounded and weak, reeling under Lavercrombe's blows. He could see Lavercrombe mercilessly striking, relentlessly following Summers here and there, beating him into the terrible condition he had been in when Funstall had stood over his bunk in the Perillo cabin looking down at him.

And now Funstall was striking. Every time one of his fists landed it carried with it the ruthless intent to maim. Merely knocking Lavercrombe uncon-

scious would not suffice. Lavercrombe must be punished as Summers was punished. He must be made to feel the thud and jar of blows delivered when he became as helpless as Summers had been. Then Funstall would finish him.

Lavercrombe might have won the fight if he could have provoked Funstall to passion. And he might have won it quickly. For Funstall raging would have been a different man and would have expended his strength in the first few minutes.

But this Funstall was a man with a cold and deadly purpose. Blows did not seem to hurt him, nor did intense physical activity seem to tire him. His steady eyes, glowing now and then with a strange fire, were cruel and calculating.

Funstall stepped in quickly and Lavercrombe drove his right fist at the face that was momentarily in his vision. Funstall stepped back slightly and the blow was short. Instantly he shot a right to Lavercrombe's face.

The blow was a terrific one. It caught Lavercrombe high on the cheek. It seemed to tear the side of his face away, and yet it was not a deadening blow. He reeled, and his head snapped sidewise. Before he could straighten, another blow thudded against his lips, driving him backward and knocking several of his teeth out.

A third blow, following so swiftly that Lavercrombe got the impression that two men were hitting him, landed on the right side of his face, snapping his head in the other direction.

NOW blows were thudding against him from all angles, and his head was bobbing from one side to the other, limply. He had no power to stop them; he could not see Funstall any more, not knowing where to look for him.

His dazed thoughts went back to the cabin in the timber. He knew now why Summers had not seemed to feel his blows; he knew why Summers had

refused to fall. Summers's senses had been paralyzed, as were his own at this minute. Summers hadn't felt the blows any more than he was feeling them.

He stood, gasping for breath, his arms hanging limply at his sides, trying to see Funstall through the film that partially blinded him.

He was aware of a shadow that appeared to dance in front of him and several times he lunged toward it, striving to grasp it. He knew the shadow was Funstall.

And then for a time which to him was immeasurable, there were no blows struck. The shadow which he knew was Funstall was standing in front of him, and words seemed to emanate from it. At first he could not understand some of the words, for they sounded unintelligible. But his brain was slowly clearing and at last he caught one sentence:

"I reckon that squares things for Summers—you miserable whelp!"

Funstall. Funstall standing close to him, taunting him.

Lavercrombe lifted a hand to his eyes and wiped the film from them. The respite from punishment had revived him, and his strength was returning. And with the strength came his passions—hatred and malignance and bestial fury. He saw Funstall clearly now. He slumped, pretending an overpowering weakness.

And then, when Funstall moved toward him, he drove his right foot savagely forward, the toe of his boot striking Funstall in the groin.

Lavercrombe's vision was now clear. He saw Funstall go down, writhing into the dust. He heard Funstall groaning.

For an instant Lavercrombe stood, staring down at Funstall. He stepped toward the writhing man and twice kicked at him. But Funstall rolled away from him and escaped.

Lavercrombe's brain was again working normally. He observed that Funstall's writhings were not as fren-

zied as they had been—that presently he would be on his feet again, fighting.

Lavercrombe had had enough of that kind of fighting. He was no longer aware that he had a face; he felt that it had been knocked off.

He straightened and stared about him, his eyes, almost closed from the blows that had landed on them, glaring malevolently through the slits that were left. He heard the man in the doorway of the saloon talking, but he did not know what was being said, nor did he care. He had only one purpose, and that was to kill Funstall.

He heard other sounds, too, besides the words that the man in the saloon door was shouting at him. He heard the rapid drumming of hoofs, the creaking of saddle leather, the shrill cries of a woman.

That was Laura Bainter. He recognized her voice. She had got out of the house, he knew, and she was afraid that Funstall would be killed. He did not look around toward the point from which the cry seemed to come. He was intent upon his single purpose and he ran to where Funstall had thrown his cartridge belt and pistol.

He heard more voices as he stooped and drew the huge weapon out of the holster. But he did not permit the voices to divert him from his purpose.

After pulling the gun out of the holster he straightened and turned toward Funstall.

Funstall was still lying in the dust. He was still writhing in pain. But there were three or four men kneeling around him. They were lifting him, as if intending to carry him away.

ALL around Lavercrombe were horses and men. They seemed to form a sort of a ring around him. He saw Clay Meeder, his wild eyes blazing, a gun in hand, watching him.

But he was not interested in the Meeder outfit. Standing in front of the men who were lifting Funstall out

of the dust was another man—Summers!

He thought he had killed Summers, and for an instant his amazement and fright were so great that he almost dropped Funstall's gun.

He stood, staring at Summers. He knew Summers was not a phantom, for he could see the welts and bruises on the man's face. And he knew that Summers had come to kill him. For that determination was in Summers's eyes, and Summers's gun was out, dangling from his right hand.

For an instant a new rage blinded Lavercrombe, and when he could see clearly again he jerked his gun upward and leaned forward a little as it roared.

He saw Summers's gun, blazing, belching smoke and flame in a continuous stream. A bullet struck him in the chest and he straightened, amazed. He did not feel the others. But the gun dropped from his hand and he staggered slowly backward and fell close to the wall of the building behind him.

Summers stepped forward and gazed down at him. Around Summers, forming a half circle, pressed the men of the Meeder outfit, Clay Meeder with them, to stare curiously at the almost unrecognizable features of the man who would not conform to the rigid rules of decency.

A silence fell. The bartender broke it.

"Gentlemen," he said, "that was a fight! Funstall got here just when Lavercrombe was asking me for my gun. Lavercrombe seemed to know that he was in for it. Funstall was cool, but there was hell in his eyes. He walked up to Lavercrombe. 'Lavercrombe,' he said, 'I found Summers the other day. Summers is my friend. You found him when he'd been shot. He wasn't able to defend himself. But that made no difference to you. You beat him up an' left him to die. I aim to do my best to square that with you—you sneakin' polecat!'"

"Gentlemen, he did!"

Summers turned and stepped out of the crowd. On the other side of the street, with her hands and feet still bound, stood Laura.

Summers went to her, cut the ropes and stood looking at her. With all the Meeder outfit watching her, she threw her arms around him and clung tightly, whispering:

"Oh, Webb! I'm so glad. I was so afraid I would never see you again!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

IN THE TWILIGHT.

FUNSTALL'S injury was not serious and while Laura and Summers still stood in the street Funstall appeared in a doorway opposite, surrounded by some of Meeder's men. Funstall's hat was off and when he saw Summers and Laura standing close together his lips wreathed into a flashing grin. But he made no attempt to join them. He was dragged into the saloon where presently the entire Meeder outfit vanished.

"I didn't see Jerry," said Summers, anxiously watching Laura's face.

"You didn't!" she answered, her voice quivering with gratitude. "Then you didn't look for him very hard, Webb, because he went into the saloon with the men. They must have found him at the foot of the slope, where Lavercrombe knocked him down. He was so interested in watching you and Lavercrombe that he forgot to think of me. And he saw me just as you were cutting the ropes off." She blushed, and added: "I suppose he knew I was in good hands."

And now Summers almost yielded to an impulse to ask her about the kiss she had given Clay Meeder. But he did not want to bring a cloud to the eyes that were gazing at him so happily.

It was not until they had reached the Bainter cabin that evening that he surrendered to the urgings of his jealousy.

And then he approached the subject obliquely.

While they had been in Pardo she had left him for a few minutes, saying she had left something at the Lavercrombe house. And while she was there Summers had been dragged over to the saloon where he had taken one drink of whisky with the men, and received their congratulations.

"That's right," said one of the cowboys. "In your place I'd be careful to stay mighty sober. You had a tight squeeze."

He had left them as soon as he could. He had not seen Clay Meeder in the saloon, nor Funstall. But when he emerged after having the drink he saw Meeder and Funstall a little distance down the street talking with Laura. Meeder was bowing to Laura and Funstall was standing near, laughing.

And now in the calm Arizona twilight, Summers was yielding to the jealousy that tortured him. Jerry was in the cabin, asleep, and Funstall was in the bunk house.

"Did you find what you went after?" he asked.

"Where?"

"In Lavercrombe's house. You went there this mornin', you know."

"Yes. I found what I went after," she said. And her eyes seemed to dance as they met his.

He was silent for a time. Then he said:

"That was Meeder talkin' to you after you came out, wasn't it?"

"Yes. Meeder and Funstall. They both congratulated me. Funstall didn't say much. He never does, you know. Just looked at me with those wistful eyes of his and told me I'd got a 'square' man."

Summers shut his teeth grimly and stared downward.

"But Meeder," Laura went on, laughing. "He looked at me in that wild way he has and told me that you didn't deserve to get me."

She glanced shyly at him, knowing

that he had been tortured by the memory of the kiss he had seen her give Meeder.

"No; I reckon I don't," said Summers. And now he looked straight at her and added:

"An' I thought, once, that you was choosin' him."

"THAT kiss I gave him!" she said, pretending surprise. "Why, I had just been asking him not to fight you, Webb. He was jealous of you. And he had given me up and had promised he wouldn't provoke trouble with you. I had to thank him some way, Webb. And that kiss meant nothing. Just his cheek."

"Shucks," said Summers, suddenly ashamed of his jealousy. "Of course, it didn't mean anything. I wasn't intendin' to mention it."

And now for a long time they sat on the edge of the porch in silence. He looked so thin and was so curiously solemn that she found his hand and pressed it tightly.

"What is it, Webb?" she asked.

"It's Funstall," he said steadily. "I'm of two minds about a thing. I reckon I've misjudged him."

"You think he isn't guilty of—of that?"

"So he's told you," he said. "No; he ain't guilty. He couldn't have done that."

"Why, that's wonderful!" she exclaimed. "Your faith in him. The way he told me about it, he certainly must have been guilty."

He shook his head.

"No," he said. "He ain't guilty. I was more guilty than he was, for thinkin' he did it. There's no way I can square it with him now."

Her eyes were shining.

"Oh, you men!" she said. "And your foolish pride! Why, all you have to do is to go to him and tell him you are sorry."

"I reckon we'll never get at it that way," he said.

She went into the house and returned to him immediately with a sheet of letter paper. She sat down, facing him, so that he could not read what was written on the paper.

"This is a letter that Lavercrombe found on that man who came here impersonating Funstall," she said. "I got it from Lavercrombe's house. Lavercrombe told me he took it from one of the man's pockets. The letter is addressed to you, but it was never finished and, of course, was never sent. But it explains a lot of things. Listen:

"DEAR WEBB:

"I'm sort of sorry I didn't take that job you offered me. Taking it would have saved me some trouble and maybe your good opinion—which I have always valued. After I left you that day in the basin when I told you I was starting south, I rode west a little ways looking for a pass which would cut off distance for me. It blowed up a storm after dark and I rode to a light I saw in a basin. The light was in a cabin, and I figured I would bed down there for the night. Well—when I got to the cabin I happened to look into one of the windows, and I saw a man in there who looked like he was going to hit a woman who was sitting on a bed. I went around to the door and opened it. And just as I did the man—he was a big fellow—hit the woman as hard as he could drive it. The blow killed her. It would have killed a man. Well, then the man turned and saw me. I didn't know that the woman was dead, then, and I told him not to hit her again. He tried to draw his gun and I shot him—twice. The woman was dead, all right. I looked through some letters and found that the man's name was Lavercrombe. The woman was Emily, his wife. Now maybe I hadn't ought to have done that, but you see,

he gave me no chance to do anything else. Now if you want to see me about this I'll be glad to come back—"

Laura paused.

"That is all he wrote," she said. She sat with the letter in her lap, looking at Summers.

SUMMERS did not move. For a long time he sat there absolutely motionless, gazing into the purple shadows of distance. Then he looked at Laura and got to his feet.

"I reckon it's got to be done," he said.

He left her and walked to the bunk house which Funstall had occupied since he had been staying in the valley.

He stopped in front of the door and seemed to call, but Laura could not hear his voice.

He stood there for some minutes and then Funstall appeared in the doorway.

The dying light was still strong enough for Laura to see their faces. Both were expressionless. It seemed that both were diffident and reluctant, and seeing them thus after the courage each had exhibited in the fight they had made in her behalf, Laura knew that the bonds of their friendship were not broken.

And now her heart was beating so wildly that she dared not look at them longer. So she turned and gazed up the valley, toward Pardo. However, in spite of her determination not to look, she turned.

Funstall had stepped down from the doorway. He was standing close to Summers and his right arm was over Summers's shoulder.

THE END.

COMING!

COMING!

Another great Western serial by

W. C. TUTTLE

In the issue of July 13th



*He slipped swiftly
from the cab with his
unconscious burden*

Fireman's Luck

Railroading in the Alaska gold camps has strange features—but none stranger than what befell fireman Gus Coogan on his hectic run to Nome

By JOHN A. THOMPSON

ENGINE No. 91, pulling the "Golden Nugget," the special coach of the road's president, stood on the siding at Skelpin, the mining camp terminus of the little railroad that wound its way over tundra, bog and glacial moraine one hundred miles into the gold-bearing mountains behind Nome.

The Old Man himself was aboard, asleep, enjoying the sweet repose that comes from a clear conscience and the knowledge of having slipped something over on the rest of his fellow men.

The Old Man had participated in a summer stampede to a new bonanza thirty miles beyond the end of his steel rails. Satisfied that he, on behalf of himself and his associates, had staked the best property in the new field, he was on his way back to Nome to reg-

ister his claims at the recorder's office.

He laughed at competition in the race to see who would first reach town and record the prior claim to the property. His special coach was there at the siding to take him into Nome. As for the rest, they'd have to wait for the morning passenger train. The Old Man wasn't worried. He had the bulge on the bunch, had the world by the tail.

And so he slept, weary from his recent exertions trekking in from the new gold fields, but happy.

He might not have slept so soundly had he known that Jed Crane, the engineer who had brought the special up to Skelpin and was supposed to take her back to Nome, was stretched out on a hard bench in the waiting room

of the station, a writhing victim of acute indigestion.

Eddie Sullivan, the conductor, was in the station too, standing over the telegraph operator.

"Tell the dispatcher," he dictated, "that Crane is down and out—sick, and won't be able to make the run. Tell him the Old Man is asleep in the car, and that there's not another engineer up here, but that if he'll let me try to pick up a man to fire—I can get a fireman in Skelpin, I guess—I'll use Fireman Coogan as engineer. We can get out of here in ten minutes, and the Old Man will never know a thing about it."

The operator nodded. He worked away at his key for five minutes, trying to rouse them down at Nome, then, after listening to the answering clicks, he turned to Sullivan.

"Nothing doing," he said. "The dispatcher says it would be all right with him, but the general super says 'Nix.' He says that if the Old Man found out that Coogan wasn't a regular engineer and you'd let a broken-down fireman take him in, there'd be hell to pay. He says it would cost you your job sure and a stiff bawling out for everybody. Says to hold everything for a few minutes and he'll give you orders what to do."

"Yeh, any time to-night, I suppose," growled Sullivan. "But if the Old Man wakes in the meantime—"

The instrument started clicking again, and the operator held up his hand for silence.

"Your stuff now," he said, reaching for a yellow order pad and a pencil. He wrote as the message came over the wire, tapped out an acknowledgment, and handed one of the order sheets to Sullivan.

"**W**HAT the devil!" grunted Sullivan, reading his orders with evident disgust. "This will mean a two-hour lay-over, and the Old Man told me particular that he wanted to get into town as soon as possible."

Jamming the instructions in his cap, Sullivan stamped out of the station and across to the siding. Fireman Gus Coogan, twisting the ends of his long sand-colored mustache around a thick calloused finger, was leaning out of No. 91's cab.

"What did they say, Eddie?" he demanded eagerly. "Goin' to let me take her in?"

"No."

The single word was like a bomb-shell of bitter disappointment to Coogan. His eagerness left him. All he had wanted, ever since he had been on the road, was a chance. A chance to make good as an engineer.

He knew he could handle No. 91—handle her as well as Crane perhaps. Now when the opportunity was just within his reach, it had been snatched away from him. He swallowed hard and tugged fiercely at his mustache. His heart felt like a lump of cold lead.

"Why?" he asked, and his thin lips quivered as they formed the word.

"Don't ask me, Gus." The conductor shrugged his shoulders. "I thought they'd let you take the run. You'd make as good an engineer as this mad-house road has got. But the orders are to wait till No. 17 gets in. She's on her way up with a couple of carloads of foodstuffs for Skelpin. A rush freight job. Schmidt has got her. He's to take us back to Nome, but he won't be here for a couple of hours yet."

He yawned and stretched his arms high over his head.

"Well, I guess I'll go back in the station and pound my ear some till No. 17 pulls in." He turned to go, noticed the dejection on the fireman's face, and paused.

"Don't take it so to heart, old boy," he said in a kindly tone, for he liked Gus. "Sorry they wouldn't let you take No. 91 this time. Your chance will come."

"I suppose so, Eddie." Gus tried to smile. "After I'm dead and gone,

probably. I thought it had come now; but I guess it hasn't. Fireman's luck, eh? I'd sorta counted on takin' No. 91 in to-night."

"And I'd counted on you takin' her in, Gus. But those orders came from headquarters, straight from the general superintendent."

The conductor went back to the station, and Gus was left alone in his cab.

"Stagin' a come-back," he mused, is about the toughest kind o' uphill grade there is." He reached in his overall pocket, wiped a bit of grime and dirt from a plug of black tobacco, and gnawed a man's size chew off one corner of the plug.

"Funny world," he murmured to himself. "Let a fellow make one mistake, and it 'll hound him all the rest of his life. Guess even up here, empty-ump miles from nowhere, they must have found out."

Gus Coogan was referring to an incident that was many years old, almost ancient history. But in the railroad business accidents are never forgotten. Nor are the men on whom the blame for such things is supposed to rest.

Back in the States Coogan had once been an engineer. A good one, too, liked by the Brotherhood, respected by his bosses. His future opened before him, a bright vista of happiness and success.

Then one day he was feeling ill, but took his run nevertheless. A crisis came, and he was seized with blind panic—showed the white feather. There was no excuse he could give for his moment of weakness. As an engineer Gus was through. The Brotherhood scorned him; the bosses said he was yellow.

The cry of cowardice reared a giant wall across his future. From that day on his path lay backward and downward.

He drifted from one road to another. As a fireman he did his work faithfully, for his heart was buoyed up by

the hope that the time would come when he would be given another chance. It was a hope that was never realized. There was always somebody who remembered the story of Gus Coogan.

"No," argued the world, with its cruel, inexorable logic. "The man had quit cold, endangered the passengers—why take the risk of giving him another chance?" There wasn't a road or a division in the country willing to trust a train to a man who had once so definitely established his own unfitness.

Gus might have quit railroading; he might also have cut his heart out. It would have been as easy for him to do the one as the other. The steel of the rails was in his soul.

In time Gus had wandered up to Alaska and over to Nome, where in the fever-excitement of gold getting a wildcat railroad had been built to the inland mining camps.

"**Y**EH," mused Gus gloomily, as he glanced at the needle on the pressure gauge and then threw a few shovelsful of coal onto his fires, "even up here they must have caught on to me. Somebody told the super, I suppose." He slammed the firebox door shut.

"Pardner, jest stand still an' don't let no noise outta you, savvy?"

Gus wheeled to face the black muzzle of a long-barrelled six-gun, held with menacing steadiness by a small man in a light gray traveling suit. The stranger had evidently climbed into the cab unnoticed while Coogan had been busy with his fires. At the stranger's feet was a bulging suitcase.

"They ain't no need to look pop-eyed, pardner. Jest obey orders."

Gus backed slowly toward the forward end of the cab, his mind working rapidly. If he could reach up and grab the whistle pull, then duck, he might live to tell it. At any rate, the screeching whistle would attract the

attention of those in the station. The visitor anticipated him.

"No whistle-blowin' or bell-ringin' business now," he warned, "or I'll blow your head off, pardner, with this. She's loaded an' my trigger finger gets kinda nervous sometimes." He waggled the muzzle of his revolver ominously. Then he pointed to the engineer's seat box. "Set down over there. Pardner, you and me is goin' to make a record run into Nome to-night."

The small man crouched low beneath the cab window so that he could not be seen from the outside and pressed his gun into the small of Coogan's back.

"Come on," he snarled, "I got no time to waste. Get goin' an' no monkey business, remember. Open her up gently."

Without a word Gus reached for the throttle. The gun bored painfully hard into his back. Gus gave the throttle a slight twist, and the engine began to move. It crept along the rails with care and caution, like some giant beast that was escaping from its master.

The end of the siding was reached. No. 91 twisted onto the main line, her ponderous drivers taking a firm grip on the heavier steel. Then Gus gave her more steam and, in spite of the uncomfortable situation into which he had been forced, an irrepressible thrill raced through his body as he sat at the throttle once more feeling an engine respond to his control.

Gaining speed with every turn of the wheel, 91 whipped round a bend and was out of sight.

As a rule, Eddie Sullivan was a sound sleeper, but the corner of the telegraph table on which he had lain down was uncomfortable and he had dozed only a few moments when he arose and went to the window to see how Coogan and the 91 were getting on.

He looked out of the dirty window once, rubbed a clear spot on the glass and looked again. Then he ran to the

door and stared dumfounded at the empty siding. He called to the telegraph operator. Together they looked up the track and down the track. And just to make sure, Eddie took a solemn look up into the air.

Eddie, cap in hand, was still scratching his head in mystification long after the operator had dashed back into the station and had opened his key.

"Crazy—crazy as a loon. Poor Gus," mumbled the conductor as he returned to the station. The operator was clicking his instrument furiously, telling any one who would listen to him that an engine and the special coach of no less important a personage than the president of the road, with the president himself actually aboard, had disappeared. Faded quite from the sight of man.

The operator found listeners aplenty, but he had difficulty in getting hold of any one who would believe him. When he finally managed to convince them at Nome that he was sober, the dispatcher and the general super both got busy.

They began by asking a thousand questions. Nine hundred and ninety-nine of them neither the telegraph operator, nor Eddie Sullivan, nor any one else for that matter, could answer. Then they issued a thousand orders. Most of them impossible of execution.

The point on which every one at both ends of the line and along all the intermediate points and way stations agreed was that old Gus Coogan had certainly gone loco.

"No. 91 went flying through here like she was riding the wings of Satan," reported Ed Leonard, the telegraph operator at the station next on the line to Skelpin. "Tried to flag her down, but signals mean nothing to her to-night."

A short while later there was another report from a station still farther down the line. "Something went by here. It might have been a cannon

ball. One flash of her headlight and she was gone. Guess it was 91."

FROM one end of the line to the other everybody was keyed to a nervous tension. The only thing to do was to keep the track clear, since it was plain 91 was paying no attention to signals; nothing to do but wait for the crash.

"What about 17 coming up with those two carloads of foodstuffs?" asked Eddie, his face white at the thought of what would happen should 91 and 17 meet head on.

"She's racing for the switch at Kenya," snapped the telegraph operator. "Cripes, but that guy Gus must be crazy as they come. Just heard he took the old trestle at Manganese Creek rocking like a leaf in a storm. How he got round the curve at his speed is a miracle. He's got a downgrade all the way in now—if he doesn't smash into 17."

Two things were on Gus Coogan's mind as he tore along through the night under the constant prodding of the man with the gun, whose one cry was: "More speed, pardner, more speed." One was how to get the better of the little man with the gray suit, who had captured the train and appeared to handle his gun so deftly. The other was No. 17.

"Say," expostulated Gus, shouting above the roar of the wind as it raced past them, "you act like a madman, and I wouldn't put murder past you. But do your plans include suicide?"

"What do you mean?" barked the other. "This is the president's special, ain't it? They'll clear the track for us. Keep goin'."

"Mebbe they will and mebbe they can't," replied Gus.

"What's that?" shouted the other. "You ain't tryin' to string me, pardner?"

"Gospel truth!" declared Gus solemnly. "There's a fast freight comin' up against us somewhere."

"Well, watch out fer it," snapped the man with the gun. "We gotta take our chances, pardner. If this jerk-water road can't give the president's special a clear track, we'll hafta jump fer it, that's all."

Suddenly 91 began to slow down perceptibly.

"Come on," barked the thief who had stolen the president's special, "no funny business. Open her up. Get goin'."

"She's wide open," replied Gus, bearing down on the throttle.

"What are we slowin' up fer then?" demanded the gunman suspiciously.

Gus leaned over and looked at the steam gauge. "Runnin' out o' steam," he said cheerfully, the first vague premonitions of an idea beginning to percolate through his brain.

"Needs coal, huh?" suggested Coogan's captor. "Well, get up off o' that seat fer awhile an' give her some. I'll keep you covered with this." He tapped Coogan in the ribs with the muzzle of his revolver.

Coogan rose stiffly and grabbed a shovel. He was smiling. He knew just what he was going to do. The sharp ferret eyes of the man with the gun may have seen the smile. More likely distrust was second nature to him.

"Put that down," he commanded sharply. "What're ya goin' to do with it?"

"Sling some coal into the fire. I can't sling it in with my hands," said Gus. For a moment his captor hesitated. The pressure gauge was falling rapidly. So was the speed of the train. "Well, go ahead, then," said the little man in gray finally. "But remember, don't try to put over any fast ones."

Gus worked his shovel swiftly into the coal in the tender. *Swish!* He heaved the first shovelful of black diamonds straight into the firebox. *Swish!* Another shovelful went into the firebox. And another. Three more. The first suspicions of the train stealer were

lulled into a sense of false security. He relaxed his vigilance for a moment.

Swish! Smack! A shovel-load of coal, flung with all the strength at the fireman's command, caught the man square in the face. He reeled backward, and Gus, wielding the shovel like a club, lunged forward. Coogan caught his enemy a smashing blow on the shoulder, but at the same time the little man fired. *Rat—tat—tat—bang—bang!* Five shots in rapid succession.

Two of them ricocheted off the shovel. One went wild. But Gus felt two stabs of pain in his left arm, and he could feel the stickiness of warm blood where his shirt had been torn above the elbow.

WITH the roar of an angry walrus Gus Coogan leaped for his man, sailed into him, battered him down.

"Now, fight, blast you!" he hissed into the ear of the gunman. "Because Gus Coogan is goin' to smash you to within an inch o' your rotten, worthless life. Pull a gun on me, will you? Steal an engine on me, will you, you dirty rat!"

Fighting like a wildcat, his arms swinging like flails, Coogan's attack carried both himself and his adversary to the iron floor plates of the engine cab. As the two rolled over and over, 91, freshly fed with fuel, began to pick up speed until she was again racing crazily down the track.

Coogan, smeared and blood-spattered, rose to his feet. For a moment he swayed dizzily back and forth watching the inert form of the man at his feet as the body rolled to and fro with the rocking of the cab. Finding some rope, he bound his prisoner securely. Then he threw the bundle of jellied humanity onto the coal in the tender and again took his place on the engineer's seat box.

He felt weak from loss of blood and the cool air that whipped past him as he leaned out of the window was re-

freshing. His left arm ached with pain and he roused himself sufficiently to rip off a piece of his shirt, which he twisted and tied in an improvised tourniquet above his wounds.

Suddenly, dead ahead, he saw the single eye of a headlight. "No. 17!" he gasped, and reached for the throttle. For a brief second he looked about him. "Kenya," he muttered, and at the same instant saw the headlight swerve from the track ahead of him. Schmidt on 17 had made the switch. But not by much, Coogan realized as he thundered past, his throttle still wide open.

For the next half mile Gus Coogan fought a battle with himself. He was back at his old post, an engineer once again guiding a rocking train. No matter what he did now, his job was gone. He could pull to a halt at the next station—or keep on into Nome. It wouldn't make any difference in the morning.

In the meantime, sitting there alone in his cab, he was an engineer. The old thrill surged through his veins and he succumbed to temptation.

"Might as well be killed for a sheep as a lamb," he murmured to himself as he opened the throttle another notch. He had a clear run into Nome now. No saying if he'd ever get another chance to handle an engine. Most likely not. Probably never even get another job as a fireman. Might as well finish the job now and take the presidency all the way into Nome.

Twice Gus showed up to shovel more coal into the flaming maw of the roaring furnace. For the rest he gave way to the mad joy of engine driving. The joy that had been denied him for many a long year.

Out of the hills rolled 91. Out and across the five-mile stretch of swampy tundra into Nome. Gus gave three or four ear-splitting blasts of the whistle to announce his arrival and pulled to a stop outside the yards. Then he moved quickly. Grabbing the trussed-up bun-

dle of his prisoner by the scruff of the neck, and stuffing his prisoner's suitcase under his arm, he slipped swiftly from the cab and made away unseen by the men who were coming on the run toward the panting engine.

Dragging his prisoner along alleys and back streets, Gus delivered him to an astonished and sleepy-eyed United States marshal for safekeeping. Then he went to his boarding house, and once in his own room, he sank down on the bed, exhausted. It was some time before he could pull himself together enough to wash the wounds in his left arm and put a rough, but clean, dressing on them.

HE slept with a heavy heart. The first thing he did in the morning was to pack his few belongings. Then he went down to the railroad office to get his time and what little money there was coming to him.

"Can't do anything for you," said the cashier. "Orders are not to give you a cent, but to send you over to the general office as soon as you showed up here. Better go over. The Old Man wants to see you."

The Old Man was the last person in the world Gus wanted to see. "Suppose I'll have to go on the carpet and get my bawling out before I get my money," he reflected gloomily.

"What do you want?" snapped the Old Man as Gus entered after timidly knocking on the glass door gold-lettered "Private."

"You wanted to see me, sir," said Gus. "My name is Coogan."

"So you're the man that took me into Nome, are you? Fireman, too, I believe."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, the marshal wants to see you, Coogan. We've found out about you."

"Yes, sir." Coogan went white. "I know, sir. I just came around this morning to get my time."

"Your time?" The Old Man raised his eyebrows. "You aren't quitting, I hope! I've just signed an order to put you on the passenger run, as engineer. We need men like you, Coogan. Railroading is a rough business up here."

Spherules of sweat stood out on Coogan's bronzed forehead. "I thought," he stammered, "you said you had found out?"

"I did," replied the Old Man testily, "about your capture of the crook. The marshal said he was Dapper Smith. He had just held up a saloon in Skel-pin." The Old Man paused. "And," he added with a smile, "I imagine there's a fat reward due you for getting him."

"Oh!" Gus fidgeted nervously from one foot to the other. "It was something else I—was thinking about. Something that happened a long while ago."

"Well," snapped the Old Man. "don't bother me with your troubles. I've got plenty of my own. Do you want to take the passenger run, or not?"

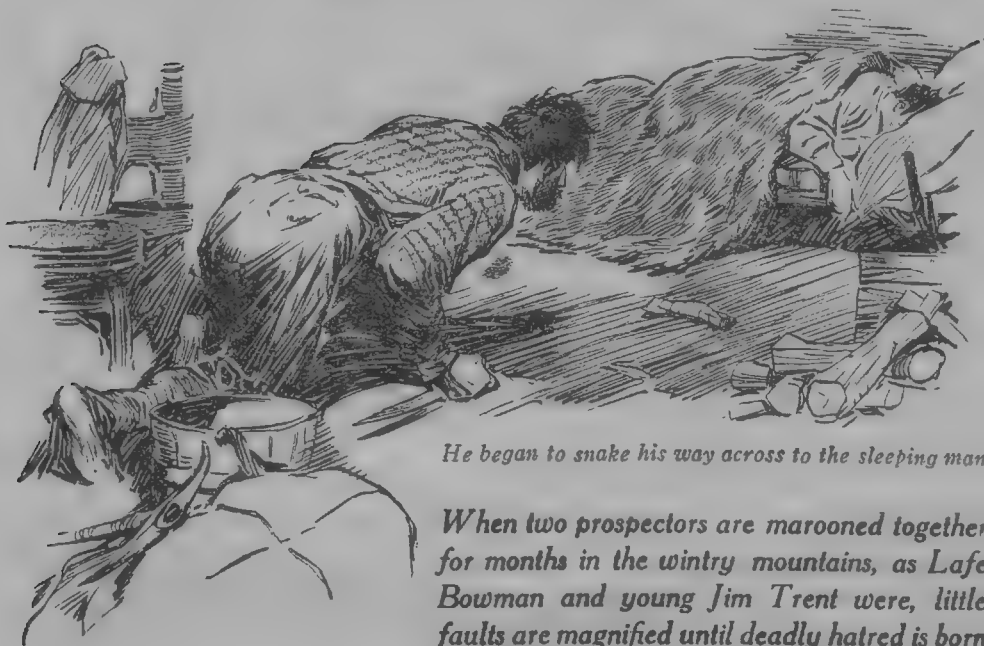
"Yes, sir." Coogan's words were scarcely audible, but the Old Man heard them and nodded his approval. A moment later Gus stood outside in the hallway, wiping perspiration off his face with a huge red bandanna. "Fireman's luck," he murmured over and over to himself. "Fireman's luck."

THE END.



Back to Civilization

By THOMAS BARCLAY THOMSON



He began to snake his way across to the sleeping man

When two prospectors are marooned together for months in the wintry mountains, as Lafe Bowman and young Jim Trent were, little faults are magnified until deadly hatred is born

I GOT a crack at Scarneck to-day!" Jim Trent exclaimed.

For a split second a hopefully malignant expression shot athwart Lafe Bowman's dark, predatory countenance. Surprised, his mind instantly conjured up the highly pleasing picture of the big grizzly which they called Scarneck getting a crack at Lafe's young, clean-cut partner.

The crafty, cruel look was instantly erased, and Lafe inquired, perhaps too casually: "Did you git him?"

"Nope!" Jim replied. "Just stung good. I followed him till he reached Saw-Tooth Gulch; then I quit. Too dangerous!"

"Leave it to you to keep out of doin' any extry work!" Lafe grunted; then, attempting to mitigate the sting of his remark: "If that old grizzly has thawed out, winter must be breakin' up."

"Guess it is, just about," Jim answered, shooting a brief glance of resentment at his companion. "But, at that, the old boy's left his den a bit soon. He probably got hungry; and now, with a good burn from my bullet, he'd be a sweet thing to meet at close quarters!"

"Too bad you didn't follow him up!" Lafe retorted. "If you really hit him—like you say—you'd have found him layin' in the first piece of cover, nursin' his wounds. There ain't any sense in passin' up a chance like that!"

"If you want him so bad," Jim snapped resentfully, "suppose you take up his trail? I'll put you on it—where he entered Saw-Tooth Gulch. From there on, it's your own funeral."

"There's a lot o' bounty on that old murderer," Lafe persisted, ignoring Jim's proposal. "It would be worth havin'!"

"Just chicken feed!" Jim answered, disdainfully. "What do successful gold miners like us need with bounties off cattle-killing bears? We've got plenty; plenty for both of us. What I wanted was his pelt for a trophy."

"You would!" Lafe growled. "Only I'd have had to go out and skin him for you—and carry the pelt in besides. But I tell you this, money's money every time—and a little more won't hurt anybody."

Jim's smile was cold, supercilious, as, with narrowed eyes he regarded his companion. "You're always looking at the money side, aren't you? Right now, I'm more interested in getting back to civilization, back where I'll have some one to associate with besides a soured grouch who's always accusing me of not doing my share. We took a lot of gold out of that pocket—big pay for one winter's work."

"Hardly enough for one," Lafe mumbled, almost inaudibly.

"What did you say?" Jim bent forward tensely.

"I said I was game to try gettin' through the Pass any time you are. There's probably lots o' snow there yet, but we can make it if we go slow—feel our way. And—" Lafe added maliciously, "you'll have to do your own walkin', goin' out; can't expect me to do it for you!"

"Oh, lay off! It's too bad about you!" Jim sneered. "You're used to this sort of thing—I'm not. Let's pull out to-morrow; I'm sick of this place. I'd never have stayed holed in here all winter if we hadn't been on the track of that gold. I'll have to admit it was your knowledge of the game that finally located it. Look here; just to show you I'm square, I'll pay you wages out of my half of our gold—pay you so much per day, for having done the work up here. I'll admit I'm not crazy about such work, and not much good at it, but I'm willing to pay for having it done for me."

Lafe squirmed uneasily at this unexpected proposal, wondering if Jim really meant it. He muttered a half finished sentence about both of them sharing equally. Then he switched abruptly to a discussion of plans for their forty-five-mile hike through the remaining snowdrifts to the nearest human habitation.

THE trappings of Pokey, the sturdy burro which had been safely wintered, were overhauled; the panniers strengthened, readied to transport safely their precious burdens of raw gold; and the ropes, which would hold them in place upon the pack saddle, were carefully tested.

The preliminary packing was done shortly before dark—by Lafe; by Lafe, working slowly, methodically, his mind busy with murky, resentful thoughts. Jim, on the other hand, appeared to be in curiously high spirits. He who had often been tired and grumpy during the long period of isolation, now seemed noisily exuberant over the anticipated start for open country. He sang, whistled, and talked, as Lafe worked about the small one-room cabin at the task of assembling their small store of possessions.

"Cut out that infernal noise!" Lafe finally exploded. "Makes a feller sick, listenin' to so much yawpin'!"

"Oh, be human for once in your life!" Jim snapped back, instantly stripped of his cheerfulness; and the remainder of the evening was passed in constrained silence.

Following a meal of sourdough bread, deer steaks, and black coffee, the two turned in. They needed a good night's sleep to prepare them for the proposed early start the next morning.

Lafe, in his bunk, lay awake, broodingly silent, listening for sounds which would apprise him of his exasperating partner's slumber. At last, in regular cadence, Jim's breathing rose and fell, rose and fell. Then Lafe slipped quietly from beneath his blankets, his keen-

edged knife in his right hand. Silently he began to snake his way across to the sleeping man.

A small piece of firewood lay in his path, and his foot struck it. It made little noise, but enough; Jim roused instantly.

"What are you prowling around this time of night for?" Jim demanded, quickly wide awake. "There's enough fire to last till morning."

Lafe growled in answer, threw the offending stick viciously into the fireplace, together with a couple of other chunks, and moodily retired once again.

Twice more, during the night, he essayed to accomplish the extermination of his partner, but, each time, only succeeded in arousing him. He cursed deeply, bitterly to himself. "I'll git him to-morrow, on the trail," he finally decided, and resigned himself to troubled slumber.

The next morning, with breakfast finished, the burro packed, everything in readiness, they prepared to start.

"We've got to watch Pokey," Jim observed, watching Lafe extinguish the last glowing embers in the fireplace. "He isn't so valuable, but his load sure is. I'd hate to have him drop over a cliff!"

"Ice-House Cañon, on beyond Saw-Tooth, is the only dangerous place," Lafe replied moodily, as he stowed away the few breakfast dishes. "I believe I forgot the ax—get it, Jim, and put it in that left pannier! We'll need it when we make camp to-night!"

"I'm getting tired of this errand-boy business," Jim grumbled, leaving the room. "And of you," he added to himself.

Scarcely was the younger man outside the door, when Lafe's hand shot out, reaching for Jim's rifle.

"I'll fix him, the lazy hound!" he muttered. Hurriedly snapping open the magazine, he rolled the cartridges out into his hand; then quickly, yet softly, he closed the emptied magazine

and replaced the rifle in its former resting place. His heart missed a beat as Jim passed the opened door, with the ax which Lafe had purposely left out of the pack. Since Jim did not pause—merely glanced in—Lafe felt sure that his work had escaped discovery.

Preparations completed, they started out, Lafe in front, breaking trail, Jim bringing up the rear, and Pokey in the middle. They traveled in this manner for over two miles, threading their way through the passes which ran from one mountain meadow to the other.

As they approached rougher, more broken country, the going became somewhat difficult. At the mouth of Saw-Tooth Gulch, Jim paused. "Wait a minute!" he called. "I'm going to take a little scout around for Scarneck's tracks—see if he's come out again. It was up in this gulch that I left him!"

"Go ahead!" Lafe agreed. "Hope you find him!" And he meant every word of it. But Jim returned shortly, shaking his head, casually commenting that he had found no sign of the wounded grizzly.

"All right!" Lafe snapped. "Now you can git in front and break trail for awhile. Do you good to do some work for once!"

Jim growled a reply.

Again they took up their journey, but now Jim walked in front—with a vengeful, money-maddened man behind him. Lafe was just a little more alert now; more tense. His eyes held a dangerous, steely glitter, and the nostrils under his hooked nose sucked in and out with each breath.

They approached Ice-House Cañon, and Lafe hitched his rifle forward, ever so little. In the first recesses of the rugged cañon, he decided, he would dissolve the hateful partnership—with a bullet. He could tumble the body down into the inaccessible gorge, hundreds of feet below, where it would never be found. He could make a

plausible explanation of Jim's disappearance. Jim had no relatives, so far as Lafe knew, no one to press bothersome inquiries.

The trail narrowed, and Jim slowed down. "Got to take it easy!" he called back to Lafe. "Feel out the trail! A misstep here, and somebody'd be an angel!" Lafe, farther back, was still above the comparative safety of a ledge, some twenty feet below. Again Jim gave full attention to the trail. "Now's the time!" Lafe decided, cautiously cocking his gun.

The plodding burro was in the way, obstructing his aim, and he maneuvered, trying for a perfect shot at the unsuspecting back. He stepped far to the left, away from the safe mountain-side, and, deceived by the overhanging layer of snow, his foot entirely missed the hidden trail, letting him fall abruptly.

With a startled yell, Lafe plunged downward, his gun spinning far out into space. Jim whirled at his shout, and saw Lafe's vanishing form. He sprang back past the burro, peered over the trail's ledge and saw his partner lying safe where he had landed, on the ledge below.

Jim stood stock-still, watching his partner awkwardly struggle to his feet on the narrow ledge. Then his blood went suddenly cold as a horrible, blood-curdling roar rent the air. Scarneck, nursing his wound in a shallow den which opened upon the narrow ledge, had been aroused by Lafe's fall; and now, breathing instant, merciless death from his widely stretched, foam-flecked jaws, he charged down upon Lafe.

"Shoot him! Shoot him!" Lafe shrieked to his partner, forgetting, in his ghastly terror, how he had extracted the cartridges from Jim's gun.

Jim raised the rifle, took quick aim at the charging grizzly, and pulled the trigger. A crashing reverberation answered the pressure of his finger;

and the maddened bear, struck high on the shoulder by the smashing missile from the high-powered rifle, was knocked outward, to crash headlong over the cliff's edge.

Slowly, unbelievably, Lafe felt himself all over, convincing himself that it was no dream, that he still lived. The miracle of Jim's unloaded gun, too, was gradually dawning on him. Just what had taken place he couldn't quite understand.

"Here, old-timer!" Jim's cheery voice broke in upon his chaotic, racing train of thought. "Grab onto this rope, and hang on while I hoist you up!"

Safe on the trail again, Lafe gazed in bewilderment, first at Jim, then at the supposedly unloaded rifle.

"Don't quite savvy, do you, Lafe?" Jim grinned, with an old-time friendliness which he had not exhibited in months. "Well, I saw you unload it this morning, Lafe. That was why, back there, I made an excuse to go up into Saw-Tooth Gulch—and reload it."

"But—but—" Lafe stammered weakly. "You knew that, and still saved my life! Jim, you're—"

Jim laughed again, a little grimly. "No, I'm not! I'm not half as good as you think. Last night I stayed awake. I was intending to kill you, Lafe, for what you'd said. But you didn't sleep very sound, kept stirring, and I lost my nerve. Along toward morning I did slip out of bed and broke the firing pin in your gun—thinking, possibly, I'd get my chance on the way out."

"But," Lafe puzzled, "you got the chance! And then—"

"I didn't want it," Jim completed the sentence for him. "Old Scarneck sort of snapped me out of it—showed me what damned crazy fools we both were. I think we've simply seen too much of each other without any variety; had too much solitude. Now let's get going—back to civilization."

THE END.



Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint



THE STORY IS THE THING.

EVERY so often we receive a letter hotly accusing us of partisanship, of editorial bias, of disseminating propaganda, of corrupting the magazine for the interests of this or that group, party or denomination. An overzealous Catholic accuses us of being dominated by the Klan because of some fancied slight against Catholics in one of our stories; a violently partisan Protestant is sure we are pro-Catholic because too many priests have been appearing in the magazine. And so it goes—ardent champions of race, creed, politics and the various isms are quick to detect fancied partiality and spring to the defense of their favorite causes—generally lacking the courage to sign their often vicious letters.

The latest to be jumped on by one of these anonymous critics is Joseph Ivers Lawrence's story, "The Master of Airlie." "A Constant Reader" writes:

I have been a constant reader and faithful booster of the ARGOSY for many years, anxiously awaiting each issue. Assuming on this position, I am taking the liberty of protesting against any further installments of "The Master of Airlie."

I cannot believe that the ARGOSY is to take part in an intermarriage propaganda. The first installment has been particularly obnoxious in endeavoring to ridicule family pride which, like religion, is sometimes overdone, but which, also like religion, is a wonderful instrument of good.

I cannot see the need for rendering ridiculous a mountain boy who fought for his country during the war and the other types mentioned in the story.

The moral of the first chapter, or rather installment, is apparently that Virginians, or possibly Americans, are inferior and need a nice rich mixture of yellow blood to tonic them up.

If Americans think they are the superior race, so do all other peoples and so have thought all other peoples.

Your magazine does not need to enter the present field. There are plenty of things to write about besides the race inferiority of our fellow countrymen.

Very truly yours,
A CONSTANT READER.

Incidentally this is the only protest or criticism this story received, while there have been many letters such as this:

Denver, Colo.
Have just finished "The Master of Airlie," by Joseph Ivers Lawrence. If that man doesn't give us a sequel to said story something drastic should be done to him. Please, please let John Peyton come back from Java, if only on a visit. Don't let's lose sight of such wonderfully interesting characters. I've been reading ARGOSY since 1912 and it's getting better every day. I read it from cover to cover and am more than pleased with every story.

Your magazine is like a lovely cake, inasmuch as it takes all kinds of ingredients to make a cake. Leaving one out would spoil the whole thing. So with ARGOSY—there is just enough Western, just enough mystery, love, *et cetera*. To take a thing away from it would "spoil the cake."

Yours for you just as you are.

MRS. LA VERNE MASSIE.

So far as ARGOSY is concerned, the story is the thing. We are concerned with no religion, no politics, no racial animosities; we are boosting no causes and attacking none. We are publishing each week a magazine of the best fiction we can secure. Each story we print was chosen because it is a good story, and with no eye to possible propaganda germs which may be lurking beneath the surface—or in the minds of too suspicious critics.

Those who want partisan and biased literature can find reams of it to attack and defend in publications devoted to that sort of discussion. They will not find it in ARGOSY. Let us get together in ARGOSY each week for a session of pure, unalloyed entertainment with a

batch of stories that are not sugar-coated propaganda, but clean, wholesome, honest-to-goodness fiction of the first water.—THE EDITOR.

ONE of many who sent up a loud cheer for Fred MacIsaac's satire, "Life Story of the Popular Murderer, Lewis J. Coffin":

Coffeyville, Kan.

I have read the ARGOSY for years, even reaching back to the prehistoric days when it was the *Golden Argosy*. I have never burdened you with any expression of like or dislike, but I cannot refrain from telling you of my appreciation of MacIsaac's last story, "Life Story of the Popular Murderer, Lewis J. Coffin." It is crammed with the keenest satire and most delicious humor.

MacIsaac's versatility is as amazing as his literary skill; he is as much at home in Monte Carlo, Paris, Lima, Brazil as in good old U. S. If your readers wish "different" stories they can always read with satisfaction those of this talented author.

CHAS. T. CARPENTER.

ANOTHER old-timer steps up to present his record:

Kenesaw, Neb.

I read the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY every week, and in perusing the Argonotes I have noticed several letters from persons stating that they had read ARGOSY-ALLSTORY for eight, or twelve or perhaps fifteen years.

Wish to state that I subscribed for ARGOSY—by the year—in 1898, received it continuously until *All-Story* appeared, when I read it, along with the ARGOSY, until they were combined, and have received the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY since that time.

I can say I have not missed a number for thirty years. I have the ARGOSY of 1898-1899-1900 bound and in my library at home. Can you beat this record?

The present make-up of ARGOSY-ALLSTORY suits me.

C. G. SCHLEGEL.

"THE BRANDED MAN," by Victor Rousseau, received a big hand—from both sides of our northern border—but here is a reader who takes exception to it:

Louisville, Ky.

I have to hand you a knock. I'm an old reader of ARGOSY and the fact that I keep on reading it shows it suits me as is. But I'm darned if I like "The Branded Man." In the first installment the author, Victor Rousseau, shows four men, including the inspector, as being crooked—men that were bought. It can't and hasn't been done. The whole world knows the caliber of the Mounted men, and it's throwing dirty water on them—even if

it is fiction—to have four men—from one detachment, too, mind you—dishonorable, bought men. We all look up to the Mounted as heroes, and this author makes a bunch of them the most despicable things on earth—bought men. You make a mistake in running this story, and let me tell you a lot of other men are thinking the same as I do. Why didn't Rousseau turn out a clean police story?

You can bet your new spring hat your readers over in Canada—there seems to be a lot of them from Argonotes—aren't going to like this serial, either.

I like all MacIsaac's, he's O. K.; in fact, all of your writers are good. Rousseau is O. K. as a writer, too, but he's got the wrong idea for this serial. If a lot of others don't say so, I'll miss my guess.

Seltzer's new serial is a good one.

This is the first time I've ever knocked a story in ARGOSY, and I hope it will be the last. Don't give us any more "branded men." There's not a reader in my whole State, Kentucky, that's going to like that story.

JOHN M. PAYNE AND FAMILY.

SORRY, Mr. Payne, but up to the time of going to press there hasn't been a single kick from our Canadian readers. And we've had plenty of letters like this:

Monroe, Mich.

I have been a reader of ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY for two years. I think it is a splendid magazine because there is every type of story you like in it. Boy! You sure have got us wondering what's going to happen in next week's issue of "The Branded Man." This story is about the most interesting story I've ever read. "Robbers' Roost" is also a very good novel. Keep on publishing R. C. M. P. stories in the ARGOSY. I can hardly wait for "Man-Hunt," by Charles Alden Seltzer.

EDWIN SHOVAR.

WE are all out of the back numbers this reader wants. Perhaps some of you can help him out:

Olean, N. Y.

I wish to purchase back numbers of ARGOSY from April to October, 1912. Address S. C. Le Fevre, 129 S. First Street, Olean, N. Y. May also be interested in other back numbers.

S. C. LE FEVRE.

ONE of our younger readers nominates a few favorites:

Philadelphia, Pa.

I suggest that you have at least two magazines a week and print more such stories as "He Rules Who Can," "The Phantom in the Rainbow," "Horror on Owl's Hill," "A Brand New World," and "The Girl in the Moon,"

and many others of their kind. You might try a few air and war stories and not so many dry Westerns. Among the four other magazines we get weekly, ARGOSY is supreme. I am only fourteen years old, but I have been reading ARGOSY since nine.

BERNARD J. KENNEDY.

ALTHOUGH it is not our custom to use Argonotes as a "missing persons" or "personal" department, these two cases impress us as exceptional and deserving of a deviation from our usual rule. It will be gratifying if ARGOSY is able to help these old readers find their missing ones:

Bemidji, Minn.

I and my son have read your book many years. Having no way of advertising in China, where my boy is now—or rather, where I heard from him last—I thought, as he reads the ARGOSY, if you would put this letter in the magazine he would see it and answer. I have written and written him, but my letters come back.

Thanking you in advance,

ALICE M. ALLEN.

New York, N. Y.

About a year ago my father disappeared. I haven't been able to locate him, nor have I heard from him since.

As a last resort I am appealing to you for help.

He has been a constant reader of your magazine for years and years, and I'm sure if he is alive the habit is still with him.

Will you please publish the following note in your Argonotes?

To MR. J. L. AKIN:

Dearest Dad—Won't you please, please write to me?

NITA CARLTON,

Care Biltmore Hotel,

New York City, N. Y.

YES, this reader guesses correctly; Captain W. R. Bethel is an ex-sea captain in his own right:

Oakland, Calif.

I have only been reading ARGOSY for a little more than a year, but as it is, it suits me exactly. Do not attempt to cut out any part of it just to suit some one class that may not like Western tales, sea tales, or any kind of tales that may not suit their exact style. After all, you publish the book to suit a varied clientele, and he who tries to cater to any one class, or to please the entire world, is lost before he begins.

Personally, I do not like the Western stories that are impossible, as we who know the West know that some of them are; but there will be thousands who read the Western stories who will think the cowboy hero should have hair pants, and a six-shooter in each hand, with another in his teeth, just for emergency

use. Then, give them that kind of a cowboy, and please them. If the rest of us do not like the author's cowboy we have the privilege of leaving him alone, and we need only to turn a page to find a story we do like. So, give the cash customers a variety, and keep them all pleased. If you were running a restaurant you surely would not serve all beans and red peppers simply because you might have one or a dozen Mexican customers.

I do like Cunningham's Western thrillers. This is a very good story, this time, "Blood Gold." For a novelette it strikes me the best of anything in the book. Congratulate Mr. Howard R. Marsh for me. He has written a good, thrilling tale, and I enjoyed all of it a lot.

Then in the "Heritage of the Sea," I will bet that your Captain W. R. Bethel is a captain by rights, because he has told the best sea story of that kind that I have ever read. Ask him where he got his data for the tale, whether on the booze boat or on the coast guard cutter. He sure made the tale true to life, even if he did switch the names of his ships and make the Bear the booze boat. The Bear is our oldest cutter over here. Tell Captain Bethel to give us another one of them and to make the old Bear the heroine of his story, and to make it longer next time. I liked "The Zero Hour" mighty well, too.

I am a seafaring man and naturally I like sea stories best, but I like them good, and I like them split up with others, too. Lots of good luck.

J. AMES ALLEN.

YOUR CHOICE COUPON

Editor, ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY,
280 Broadway, N. Y. C., N. Y.

The stories I like best in this issue of the magazine are as follows:

- 1.....
- 2.....
- 3.....
- 4.....
- 5.....

I did not like.....
because.....

Name.....

Street.....

City..... State.....



Looking Ahead!

Something different in Western novels is

BLOOD ON THE SNOW

by FRED MacISAAC

Starting in New York newspaper and society circles, the scene soon changes to Wyoming—and we are on the trail of a good, tense action story. A Western novel that is a good story first and a Western story second—and a MacIsaac story all the way!

Start it next week in the ISSUE of JUNE 1st

Another feature of next week's issue is

High Line Riders—by Eugene Cunningham

A Complete Novelette

A Texan and a Westerner to the core is Cunningham—which is the main reason for the genuine ring of all his Western scenes and characters. Again in "High Line Riders" he has given us a thrilling story right out of the everyday life of the Texas outlaw fraternity.

And don't miss

Phantom Bullets—by Theodore Roscoe

A strong and vivid short story of the Foreign Legion.

The Other June Issues Will Bring

JUNE 8th—F. V. W. MASON and W. WIRT

JUNE 15th—ARTHUR GILCHRIST BRODEUR and BERTRAND L. SHURTLEFF

JUNE 22nd—RAY CUMMINGS and ROBERT E. PINKERTON

JUNE 29th—GEORGE F. WORTS and THEODORE ROSCOE

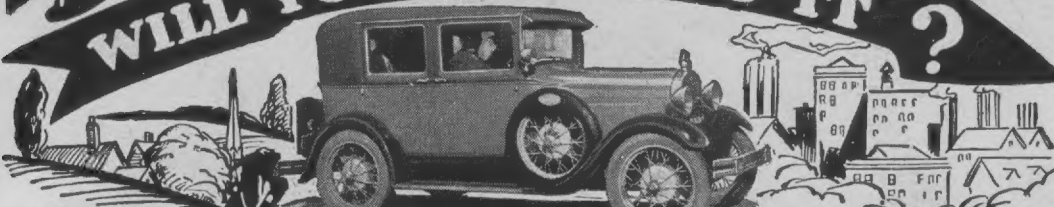
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Miles	Miles	Miles	Miles
Buick.....28 $\frac{1}{2}$	Ford (Model T) 42	Oakland.....31	Pierce Arrow.....22
Cadillac.....21 $\frac{1}{2}$	Ford (Model A) 40	Oldsmobile.....34 $\frac{1}{2}$	Pontiac.....31
Chevrolet.....41	Hudson.....23 $\frac{1}{2}$	Overland.....41	Reo.....20 $\frac{1}{2}$
Chrysler.....30 $\frac{1}{2}$	Hupmobile.....24 $\frac{1}{2}$	Packard.....21 $\frac{1}{2}$	Star.....41 $\frac{1}{2}$
Dodge.....31 $\frac{1}{2}$	Marmon.....21 $\frac{1}{2}$	Plymouth.....29	Studebaker.....29
Essex.....32	Nash.....30	Graham-Paige 23 $\frac{1}{2}$	Willys-Knight 29

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Try this wonderful VIX Moisture Humidifier and Carbon Eliminator AT MY RISK on YOUR OWN CAR to prove that VAPOR MOISTURE (drawn from Radiator to Engine) gives you that wonderful night driving effect ALL THE TIME with MORE mileage from gas and oil—eliminates hard carbon accumulation—gives MORE power, a SNAPPER, PEPIER motor, FASTER acceleration, a SMOOTHER, QUIETER running engine and HIGHER top speed.

VIX will PROVE ITS MONEY SAVING MERIT on your own car by 8 DEMONSTRATIONS—conducted by yourself AT MY RISK—the most SENSATIONAL, most ASTOUNDING, most CONVINCING DEMONSTRATIONS you ever saw. If you don't find from your tests that it does MORE than I claim; return it and it COSTS YOU NOTHING. I want wide-awake hustling, County, State, Province and National Agencies everywhere, part or full time, to make \$350 to \$1500 per month filling the great DEMAND for this wonderful invention wherever introduced. Write for my FREE TRIAL and MONEY MAKING OFFER. Use coupon below.

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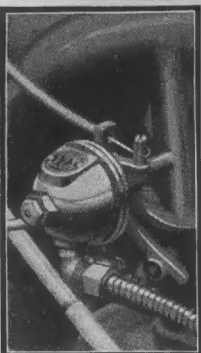
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Address.....

Town..... State.....

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